

Life boats

Breast cancer survivor organizes a dragon boat racing team to help others recover

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The joy Lucille Allegretti-Freeman always derived from paddling a kayak on a quiet lake has found a higher purpose aboard what can truly be called a lifeboat.

The 52-year-old Voorheesville mother of three is starting the Capital Region's first breast cancer survivor dragon boat team.

With origins rooted in ancient China, dragon boat racing features 40-foot wooden vessels carved like dragons and propelled by crews of 20 paddlers. The crew also includes a ceremonial pace drummer at the bow and someone on the rudder.

But it wasn't the sport's history, or the intricate, colorful dragon carvings and symbolism that caught Allegretti-Freeman's attention. It was that there are breast cancer survivor teams in places like Buffalo, Ithaca, Burlington, Vt., Boston and Philadelphia, and medical research shows that the sport can significantly improve the physical and mental health of participants and help them cope with post-recovery trauma.

"I think a lot of women are looking for ways to connect with other women who have had breast cancer, but not necessarily a sit-down support group," said Allegretti-Freeman, a clinical social worker at Ellis Mental Health Clinic whose own breast cancer was detected May 1 during her annual mammogram. "I think this really touches your mind, body and spirit, and it does it without dwelling on the breast cancer."

A dragon boat team was exactly the life-enriching activity Allegretti-Freeman was seeking after cancer reminded her of her own mortality.

"I think part of it was thinking about how do you live your life with all this uncertainty, and there is something about breast cancer that brings it all real close.

"But the fear doesn't grip you like there's no way out. I thought 'How can I live my life differently?' I wanted to do more in nature. I wanted things that might heal me on all different levels, the water, nature, movement, people."

Challenging a theory

The connection between breast cancer survivors and dragon boating started in 1996 when a Canadian doctor challenged a once-accepted theory about exercise and breast cancer patients.

Dr. Don McKenzie, a sports medicine physician at the University of British Columbia, launched Abreast in a Boat to challenge the belief that repetitive upper-body exercise in

women treated for breast cancer encourages lymphedema, a buildup of lymphatic fluid.

McKenzie believed that by following a special exercise and training program, women could avoid lymphedema and enjoy active, full lives. The women were carefully monitored by a sports medicine physician, a physiotherapist and a nurse. McKenzie's theory was proven correct. No new cases of lymphedema occurred, and none of the existing cases became worse.

From that medical study involving one boat of 25 women, the Abreast in a Boat organization has grown to include six boats based in Vancouver and inspired 50 teams in Canada and another 48 worldwide.

Allegretti-Freeman first learned about dragon boat teams in early September while exploring activities for breast cancer survivors on the Internet. A couple weeks later, she came across an article about it while glancing through a Women & Cancer magazine in her doctor's office, something she called a happy coincidence.

Getting started

On Sept. 29 -- she has the date written down -- she e-mailed teams in Buffalo, Philadelphia and Vermont where she found support and encouragement. "I call them my angels, telling me I can do this and I can do that," she said. "I imagined them with their arms around me."

Next, she contacted Capital Region Action Against Breast Cancer and another area support and education organization, To Life!, and was invited to write articles in their newsletters seeking crew members.

She's has about 15 women aboard, despite not yet having a boat, which will cost about \$17,000, a coach or even an official team name. But Allegretti-Freeman, who will attend a weeklong dragon boat training clinic in Florida in April, said she hopes to have her team ready to compete against other breast cancer survivors at dragon boat festivals in Ithaca in July and Burlington, Vt., in August.

The festivals provide boats for teams that don't have their own.

"The dots aren't all connected yet," she said, "but I found an Einstein quote a couple weeks ago that really explained it for me. Einstein said, 'Imagination is more important than knowledge,' and so I keep thinking about that and it helps keep me going.'

Keeping active

Joan Sheehan, 67, is the oldest team member so far. Sheehan is active in Pilates and weight training, and as a 21-year breast cancer survivor noted that survivors have always been encouraged to be physically active.

"When I saw someone who shares something with me and who has this idea that is really motivating her, I felt it was something I could really support, and it would be good for me at the same time," said Sheehan, who is co-president of Capital Region Action Against Breast Cancer. "She's inspiring. I think she is a take-charge person who believes you may have cancer, but it doesn't have you. What she's doing is really trying to prove that."

Allegretti-Freeman's husband, John, said his wife has an inner strength that helps her through difficult times.

"That's what gave her the confidence to begin this whole process and follow her dreams," he said. "These things are reminders that life is precious and short and we have to be active now. I think this dragon boat is a way to help her project that."

Being together

Allegretti-Freeman, meanwhile, is bringing a refreshing spirit to the endeavor, one that's foreign to the popular team sports mantra of winning at all costs. She's never been on a sports team of any kind, doesn't watch sports on TV, and said that if it weren't for her cancer she would never even consider doing something like this.

And she certainly doesn't think her lazy summer days splashing around in a kayak with her family on Pyramid Lake in the Adirondacks will give her any advantage.

"One thing that really appealed to me about this is that we'll all have a lot in common, but won't have to have any athletic ability," she said. "Mostly, it's about being together, and training on the water. The competition is really secondary.

"And we'll laugh a lot. Can you imagine us the first time in the boat, trying to get it to go forward?"

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