

# EMPOWERED PADDLERS

**When cancer strikes, the Pink Dragon Ladies help women to strike back — with synchronized strokes that power this competitive dragon boat racing team with hope and improved strength.**

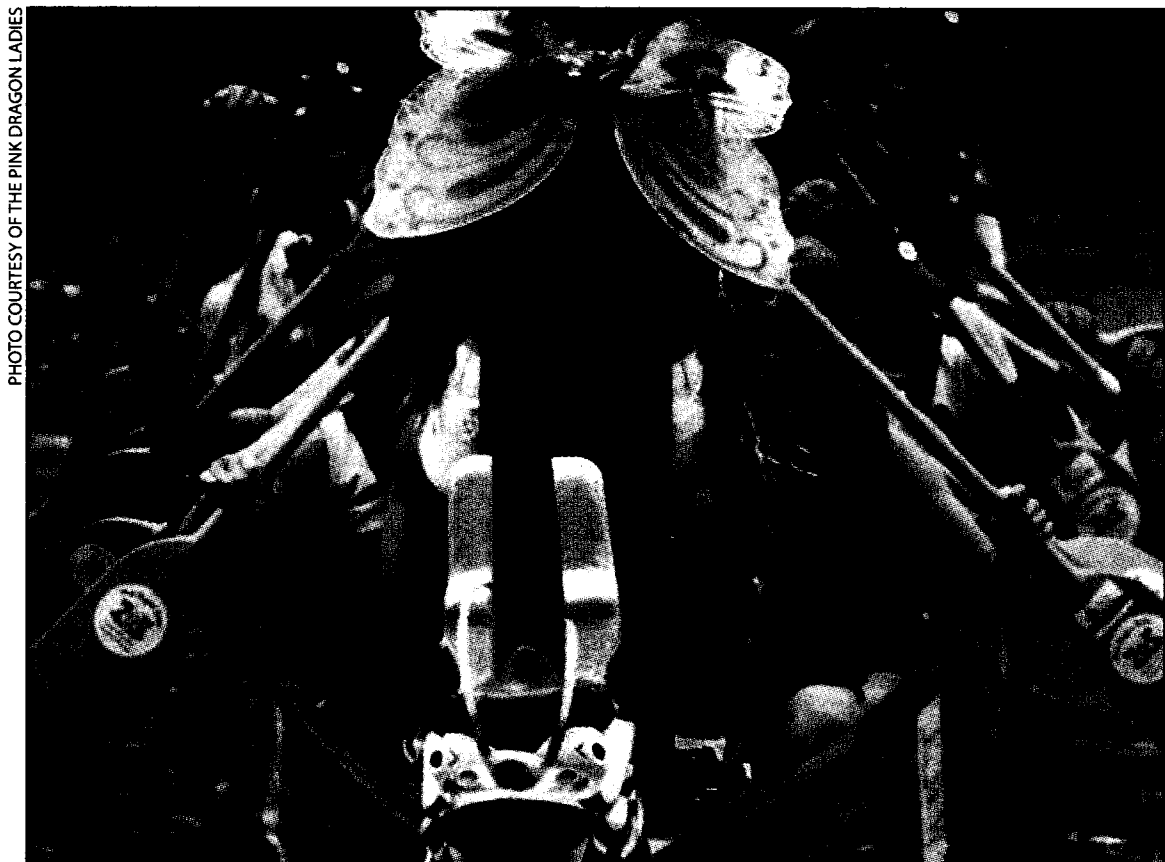


PHOTO COURTESY OF THE PINK DRAGON LADIES

FHCN PHOTO BY BILLIE S. NOAKES

**P**addles up! Twenty women hear those words and know it's time to get down to business.

*Take it away!*

Twenty pink paddles descend in unison, slicing into the waters of Tampa Bay.

The women wielding those paddles power their purple-hued hull with grit, determination, and a fierce competitive edge. They are the Pink Dragon Ladies, a dragon boat racing team, part of Team Survivor Tampa Bay. Each of them has faced down the specter of a cancer diagnosis and come through her treatments determined to thrive as well as survive.

"I like to think of our team as the militant branch of cancer survivorship," quips past president Liz O'Connell. "We go out there [on the water] armed with our pink paddles, our purple boas, and our glitter, and we fight recurrences, metastases, the side effects of our treatments, even the loss of life. These are all part of the reality of cancer, and it's a whole lot easier going through it with a boatload of others who understand exactly what you're dealing with."

## Some history

The Pink Dragon Ladies (PDL) is a fairly new team in a sport that dates back more than 2,000 years. It began in China, only catching on in the West about twenty-five years ago.

Dragon boats are forty-foot-long canoes that seat a crew of twenty paddlers, a coach, and a drummer who keeps time.

Liz, PDL coach Joan Busenbarrick, and vice president Kathy Murphy were all members of the original dragon boat team of



**IT TAKES A TEAM.** The Pink Dragon Ladies, part of Team Survivor Tampa Bay, formed their team as a way to improve their own health and stamina following cancer diagnoses while participating in a demanding and rewarding competitive sport.

survivors that formed in November 2004 with encouragement from Moffitt Cancer Center. They remain active to this day. Other members signed on for the short term to help launch the team. Some of the original crew were out-of-towners who pitched in to fill empty seats.

In the beginning, the team didn't have its own boat for training or racing. Joan, with a world class athletic background in synchronized swimming, trained the team in a conference room, with the women sitting on chairs and brandishing yardsticks in place of paddles. They used a borrowed boat for their early races.

"Dragon boat racing was so new, we didn't know what we were doing," remembers Kathy, "but we were having fun. Joan and Liz had competitive sports backgrounds, and I simply enjoyed staying in shape, but the women who didn't have a workout routine soon found themselves getting stronger and feeling better with every training session. We needed more crew members if we

wanted to fill a dragon boat with local women, so I talked to an acquaintance of mine, radiation oncologist Dr. Kathryn Kepes from the Center for Radiation Oncology, to ask her to help get the word out to other cancer survivors who might want to join us."

Dr. Kepes had other ideas.

"I was a donor in search of a cause, quite frankly," she says. "I was looking for a project that my practice could help support from the ground up, and I loved the enthusiasm of these women. Their dragon boat team wasn't only helping make them whole again, its goal was to make them better. They didn't want to simply row ... they wanted to win. And they didn't want special concessions because they're women and cancer survivors. They were motivated to work and compete as athletes, nothing less."

Dr. Kepes put up the first \$5,000 toward the purchase of a boat the PDL could call their own. She spoke to her colleague, Dr. Rand Altamose, who matched the donation. It was

enough to buy the crew their dragon boat — a purple one, to represent all cancers.

The *Dragon Lady* was delivered on April 4, 2006. The Stewart's Foundation donated space in its boathouse to store the boat between practices, and on April 15, 2006, the PDL team hosted its launch party, attracting local television coverage.

Two weeks later, *Dragon Lady* made her race debut as part of Florida's first Breast Cancer Survivor Division, carrying the Pink Dragon Ladies to victory over the visiting Dragon Divas from Atlanta. The date also marked the start of a tradition for the PDL, a flower ceremony in memory of cancer patients who have passed on.

"We have another tradition in memory of our own members who have lost their battles against cancer," notes Liz. "While the outside of our *Dragon Lady* carries decals recognizing our sponsors, the inside of the boat carries recognitions of those team members who are with us now in spirit."

## "Power up!"

*Power up!* is the command for paddlers to pour it on, not necessarily to increase paddling speed, but to increase intensity and pull steadily ahead.

PDL entered its *power up* phase as a team when they traveled to Tavares, FL, in March 2007 for the Central Florida Dragon Boat Race Festival. They were the first survivor team in general competition, and the only all-female team entered. Even so, they finished 22<sup>nd</sup> out of 28 teams, besting six co-ed teams. The following month, several PDL members attended a dragon boat camp to improve their paddling and coaching skills.

The members of PDL take outreach seriously, both to attract new team members and sponsors, and to support other survivor efforts. PDL members join with others in Team Survivor Tampa Bay to support fund-raising efforts for cancer research. They staff a cheering section for the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer 3-Day walk, and participate in the American Cancer Society's Making Strides Against Breast Cancer walk in St. Petersburg.

They build bridges with other organizations, too, introducing Girl Scouts to the joys of dragon boat racing, and joining in the first Tampa dragon boat mini-regatta. They staff a concession at Raymond James Stadium to raise funds for life jackets, registration fees, insurance, and maintenance. Those ongoing expenses mean the team is always looking for new sponsors, because they don't want financial constraints to keep any survivor off this team. They speak to local civic groups to offer their brand of survivorship to others.

## Many paths to the dock

For every woman who joins PDL, the experience means

something different.

Membership chair Becky Lloyd learned about the Pink Dragon Ladies at a conference in 2004. She was interested, but didn't act on that interest for another year.

"When I finally met the team and started practicing, it became a passion for me," says Becky. "Paddling provides a tremendous workout, but the shared support among all the team members, the friendships we develop, tops it off."

Fund-raising chair Carol Lee Banks says she was "bitten by the dragon the first time I got in the boat."

"I'd seen a story about one of their dragon boat events on the news and I told myself, *I've got to get into this group!* I liked the fact that these were very tenacious women with spunk. They wanted to celebrate life in a way that was healthy, with a good support group and a lot of fun."

She adds that paddling is an excellent way to prevent lymphedema, a very common complication for breast cancer patients who have had surgery to remove cancer-stricken lymph nodes.

Joan remarks, "I saw PDL as a way to put my athlete's training in mind/body connection to good use. On a team, we're each personally responsible for being the best we can be, and we have the support and trust of others on the team who are counting on us. When we're in that boat, we're acting as one person — one strong, confident person — and we're fighting back against our cancer."

Verna Nasrallah joined the group late in 2007 and now succeeds Liz as president.

"I learned about the group while searching for information and support online, and I was intrigued by what they were doing," says Verna. "I didn't know what to expect at first, and I was worried about how paddling would affect lymphedema, but the more I paddled, the more exercise I got, the better I felt."

"Cancer survivors have been through so much, and it makes me feel good to know that I can do something like this, and be part of bringing this opportunity to other women who are survivors, too."

"Dragon boating makes me feel alive again." **FHCN—Billie S. Noakes**

Sport and Support for Women with Cancer

Write to the Pink Dragon Ladies at:

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Tampa, FL 33620

Learn more about them by visiting:

<http://pinkdragonladies.blogspot.com>