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Dragon Dream Team breathing new life into cancer survivors

By Mike D'Agruma

PORTAGE LAKES — Throughout the years, Jessica Mader has been forced to worry about more things in her lifetime than most would care to worry about in several.

Take breast cancer, for example. Like many women, she became part of a club when she was diagnosed, a club that never discriminates, but one no member chooses to join.

So one could argue that the Silver Lake resident shouldn't be forced to worry about things that might seem trivial. Like caps. Hot pink caps, to be specific. But it was only a short while ago that Mader was standing in a Turkeyfoot Lake Road business worried about them and how many the store might have. It was too late to have any special-ordered.

She was ready to cry. And store employees would see her cry — after returning from the basement with a box holding 22 caps — the exact number Mader needed.

Hot pink caps may seem like a trivial thing, but to Mader they were anything but. Each cap donned the heads of the 22 breast cancer survivors that took the Dragon Dream Team's first strokes June 9 on the Portage Lakes at Craftsman Park. That day, the team held a launch ceremony that featured an eye-dotting ceremony — a Chinese tradition that involves painting in the pupils of the dragon's eyes, which are left unfinished. It's believed this action breathes life into the dragon.

The team is comprised of about 75 breast cancer survivors who participate in dragon boat racing, a sport that has its 20 rowers in 40-foot long hulls decorated to look like dragons. The crew also includes a tiller, who steers the boat from the rear, and a drummer/caller, who sits facing the crew.

Watching Mader, executive director of the team, and how she interacts with its members, or, as she says, 75 of her best friends, one would think she should trade her hot pink cap for a hot pink crown. That's because according to team members, Mader is their queen, their "dream queen." She has a number of nicknames. They change depending on whom she is communicating with, but her role in bringing the sport to Ohio, in constructing the state's first team, will always remain the same.

Dragon boat racing is not a new sport, having originated in Asia about 2,000 years ago.

And Mader, who has been in remission for two-and-a-half years, got her first taste of dragon boat racing after spending two summers rowing with a Canadian team of breast cancer survivors based in Nova Scotia named “Bosom Buddies.”

Dr. Douglas Wagner, a breast-reconstruction specialist practicing at Akron Plastic Surgeons, and Mader’s doctor, said Mader came back from Nova Scotia a new person — she came back as the “dream queen.”

“She came back and she was just a different person than when I had seen her in the spring, far from being somebody who was recovering from cancer ... she was enthusiastic and athletic and said, ‘We’ve got to start a team here,’” Wagner said. “So I told her if she could organize it, I would buy her a boat — and here we are.”

Two Mader-led open houses and about 75 team members later, the Dragon Dream Team may have hit the water only recently, but those few strokes symbolized a year of forming friendships; of members meeting at Mader’s house for support group meetings; of tears, hugs and prayer; of taking the loneliness of cancer away.

“What goes through your brain [when you’re on the water] is the fact that you’re healthy — you just completely forget about the cancer; when you had it, how long you had it, what you went through,” said Green resident Linda Glass. “It’s just calmness, peacefulness.”

“We’re supposed to leave everything on the shore when we get in the boat,” added Marlene Stresnak, also a Green resident.

The Dragon Dream Team — it is exercise, friendship and support. It is hot pink caps.

“It’s amazing,” Mader said. “It’s just amazing.”

The Dragon Dream Team is always looking for more men and women dealing with breast cancer to join the squad. For more information, visit www.dragondreamteam.org.