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## **Dragon boating, an inspiration for breast cancer survivors**

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PORTAGE LAKES - Seventy-five women with breast cancer, from all over Northeast Ohio, find themselves "in the same boat" Jessica Mader stated - an Asian dragon boat that is.

Mader was diagnosed with breast cancer two years ago. She had several surgeries before she left for her vacationing home in Nova Scotia, Canada, only to return with a new zest for life. Her doctor, Dr. Douglas Wagner, from Akron Plastic Surgery, was curious as to what contributed to her emotional and physical wellbeing, knowing that she had more surgeries ahead.

"I went dragon boating because my niece gave me a life vest, a paddle, and a birthday card and said, "Be on the dock at 6 o'clock every Wednesday night," Mader laughed. "I had seen my niece in a dragon boat the summer before."

Mader's niece, Michelle Hughes, had been diagnosed with breast cancer several years ago and she was being transferred to Toronto. Having started her own dragon boating team, The Bosom Buddies, she left behind her tools of the trade for her aunt with instructions.

"I was on that dock at 6 p.m. on Wednesday night," Hughes said. "All these ladies hugged me and welcomed me and treated me like family. We all got in the boat, and we paddled and nobody even asked me anything about cancer. I never asked them about cancer because we had all had breast cancer. We didn't need to talk about it. It was the most wonderful feeling paddling with them."

Two years later. Dr. Wagner and Jessica Mader are starting their own dragon boat team.

"Dragon boating has been pretty popular in Canada for 10-12 years," Wagner stated. She came in for check-up one summer after she came back from Canada. It was like she was a totally different person. She didn't have this; 'oh, I'm feeling sorry for myself. I have breast cancer.' She said, 'oh, that's all behind me. I'm an athlete now.' She was so excited."

"When I came back in October and strolled into his office with the vigor and vitality of a summer athlete with such a positive attitude that didn't quit and still hasn't quit, he didn't say anything to me at first because I had a couple of surgeries to go."

The following spring, Dr. Wagner approached Mader and said, "if you can organize a [dragon boat] team, I will buy you a boat."

Boats average around \$30,000, but that did not stop Wagner.

"This is all about quality of life," Wagner stated. "This is something real positive that we can do for the women who are breast cancer survivors. This is all about putting breast cancer behind them and it is a great physical activity. I can't believe how positive it has been for the couple months we have been having organizational meetings.'

There has been an incredible change with the women who have involved themselves with the two-week old sport at Craftsman Park in New Franklin.

"I haven't had a day where I don't cry," Mader stated. "The women tell me, 'You are a champion of women, ' I don't feel lonely anymore' or You have changed my life.' To think that there was this crying need for dragon boating in Northeast Ohio."

The women come from Cleveland, Canton, Youngstown and the greater Akron area. They commit to practicing three times a week for two hours each time.

"This is not just a summer activity. This is inspiring breast cancer survivors to be fit and to have regular exercise," Mader stated.

The team calls themselves The DreamTeam. "The [anagram] for madder is dream," Mader explained. "I named it after myself. It was my dream to have this dragon boat. I want this dragon boat to carry my name. We will have spin-off teams that will be here long after I'm gone, but I'm also the archivist and I will have that to pass along."

The women range in age from 26 to 76. Mader is the oldest. "I want this to be my gift to the breast cancer survivors for Northeast Ohio."

There is nothing like placing foot into that paddle boat and pushing off the dock. The drum begins to drum as the women paddle to the beat. "When we are out on that water," Mader explained, "we don't want to be talking about cancer. We want to be out on that water tranquil. It is an unspoken support. It is a silent understanding."

Holly Ross, paddler, shares what it feels like once they leave the dock. "When you are out on the waters, you are just paddling and you are thankful for the water and the day. We were told at our first practice to leave our troubles on the shore."

Susan Balmert, a 17-year cancer survivor from Bath, is very thankful for this experience.

"I had no idea what dragon boating was, but I think it is just fantastic. I am just so grateful this doctor takes medical healing beyond the office and does this for us. I have taken on new challenges that I probably wouldn't have taken on before. This is probably one of the most unique ones," said Balmert. "This is my way to let other survivors realize that I have 17 years. They could be paddling around for a long, long time yet."

Wafa Chandler and Diane Perrine, both from Copley, have been lifelong friends. They went to high school together and survived breast cancer together. "We became even closer once I was diagnosed," Wafa stated. "We are going to get together more often now that we are on the paddle team."

"We went to school together, and now we are on the paddling team together," Diane stated. "We have worked together on this whole thing."

Both women are very thankful to Dr. Wagner and Jessica for giving them this opportunity.

"Dr. Wagner really takes care of us. He really cares about how we accept ourselves and how we want to look as a person and get back to the way we were. Not everyone can look the way they once were, but he is very concerned about making things right. He fixes things until we look normal," Perrine stated.

Wafa Chandler's husband, Dave, loves what this has done for his wife. "I think that it is great that people are talking about positive issues instead of the past. They are moving forward with their lives and realize that there is more to it than I have cancer. I'm going to die."

Dragon boating originated in Asia in 450 B.C.

"It was 2400 years ago that they started being very popular in Hong Kong, which is the mother site for dragon boats," Mader explained. "Now it is the fastest moving sport in the world today. I used to say that it was the fastest growing water sport in the world; but a few years ago, they dropped 'water sport,' and now it is the fastest growing sport in the world."

The sport is prevalent in Europe and Germany. There are only a few teams in the United States.

The Dream Team is the first breast cancer survivor dragon team in Ohio. Eleven years ago, a Dr. Donald Mackenzie decided to test the medical opinion that it was not good for women with breast cancer to have repetitious upper body movement. He took 20 of his own breast cancer patients and bought a dragon

boat. "To this day, I admire those women because they never knew if it was going to cause lymphedema or not."

After a woman had a mastectomy, they were not allowed to do any strenuous activity.

"The quality of life after breast cancer was so restrictive," Mader explained. "You really never got over being a recovering patient."

Eighteen weeks later, Dr. Mackenzie believed he had sufficient evidence to write in the Canadian Medical Journal explaining that women who had breast cancer needed upper body exercise and that it did not cause lymphedema, which had first been thought.

Dr. Wagner purchased the boat from a distributor called the Great White North in Toronto. She was very particular about how she wanted the dragon decorated.

"I was very particular because Ohio doesn't have a breast cancer survivor boat, and Ohio recognizes the pink ribbon as cancer," said Wagner. "That pink ribbon is a very pale pastel pink. If we are going to be on the water developing awareness about cancer, we better have pink that is easily seen from the shore as we practice. We want people to realize that there is a quality of life after breast cancer. There will be awareness. They have to have more research about [the disease]."

Mader and the 75 women are looking to compete. Many of them are still in treatment; and many of them still have surgeries ahead, so they will never have 75 ready to compete at one time. But as long as they can paddle, they will.

Todd McKinney, pastor at The Chapel in Green explains how important this is, "This is about overcoming. This is about determination, courage and strength. It is the spirit of the dragon. We are all witnesses to the devastation of what cancer causes. We are all witnesses that all these people have overcome. That is what we witness when people are out on the boats like this. We are witnesses to God's goodness and creation, and we are witnesses of the mystery of pain and suffering and the devastation and the heartache of breast cancer. We are witnesses of all these people have been through. The not knowing and the treatment and the hardship are what is difficult. We are witnesses that they are survivors. Our hope is that the boat goes for a long, long time."

McKinney provided the dragon costume for the dragon dance. His mother-in-law Joyce Edwards, designed it. "It is like a sea serpent dragon, so the colors shimmer back," McKinney explained.

Several students from China that attend the University of Akron participated in the dragon dance, Joan Wang, one of the dancers, explained. "We are all

motivated. We see all the cancer survivors. It is very meaningful for them, and it is a celebration so we want to be there for them. Dragon boating is Chinese custom. It is a festival in China. The dragon boat racing is to celebrate. It means to overcome."

"The Asian dragon is prosperity, good health, and longevity," Mader explained. "It has always been respected, and it is a wonderful thing to be associated with the dragon boat."

Mader has seen such a determination with the women. "I have never seen such willingness, enthusiasm, and such caring with 75 people. This is nothing short of a miracle at that. There is no competitiveness. Everyone is just so giving."

"We share such a common situation unfortunately," paddler Karen Koch, stated. "But this provides a lot of support and camaraderie. This is also a way to have some fun. It is a way to move on and go on with life."

Before the women went paddling, the dragon had to be awakened. It is custom for the eye of the dragon to be dotted. Su Wang, originally from Taiwan, received this honor.

"They needed a volunteer to awaken the dragon," Wang stated. "I am very glad to help. It was nice, especially for the women with breast cancer."

Before every practice, the women form a circle and join hands for the circle of strength. This is a powerful demonstration of the women's strength for each other and moving toward the future.

"Suffering builds character," McKinney explained. "But nobody really asks for suffering. You think about the journey of everyone of them. It is so amazing. There is this sense of determination to go on. That takes courage."

"These breast cancer survivors want to make a difference in the world, the community, and in their own lives," Mader stated. "It is the most inspiring thing I have ever been involved in."

The Dream Team is looking for any business corporation or individual who would like to sponsor them. Their goal is to be competing throughout the world and join the many other women who have fought and survived breast cancer as paddlers. If interested in learning more about Mader's team go to [www.dragondreamteam.org](http://www.dragondreamteam.org).

You can email them at [Jessica@dragondreamteam.org](mailto:Jessica@dragondreamteam.org). The phone number is 330-289-7684.

Jessica Mader was just recently nominated for a program on CNN for people

who are not nationally known, but should be.