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A race against breast cancer



BREAST CANCER DRAGON BOAT

Photo by Colleen Toms, Brant News
Anne Martin, Janet Cockburn and Colleen Heron.
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In 2014, Brantford residents Colleen Heron and Anne Martin will be among a team of 22 dragon boaters defending their international title as world champions. Team Knot A Breast clinched the championship in Peterborough in 2010, where they competed against 73 teams of dragon boaters from around the world, including South Africa, Germany, Australia, Italy, England, Canada and the United States. All of them were breast cancer survivors. Like the Olympics, the International Participatory Breast Cancer Dragon Boat Festival is held every four years in different countries. Next year's festival will be held in Sarasota, Florida from Oct. 24 to Oct. 26, 2014. Host communities are awash in a sea of pink as survivors paddle furiously to be the first across the finish line. "In Peterborough, the whole city came out to support us with a huge parade down the street," said Janet Cockburn, a founding member of team Knot A Breast. "People were coming out clapping and cheering us on. At one point, all you could see was pink — pink hats, pink scarves, there was even a huge garbage truck there painted pink with breast cancer symbols on it." Team Knot A Breast was established in Burlington in 1998, marking the seventh breast cancer survivor boat team in Canada. It has grown from about 20 members in its inaugural year to 70 members, including two men. About 45 are active paddlers. "(Breast cancer dragon boating) started when a sports medicine doctor in Vancouver, Don McKenzie, disputed what doctors were telling women after they had breast cancer," Cockburn said. "They were being told not to do upper body exercises after breast cancer because of the risk of lymphedema." A core group of breast cancer survivors participated in a study to prove that

upper body exercise would be beneficial rather than harmful. “They put their heads together to come up with the most strenuous upper body exercise that is continuous and is a sport, so they did dragon boating,” Cockburn said. Since then, the sport has attracted survivors world-wide. Team Knot a Breast competes in about seven dragon boat festivals each summer, mostly against teams of fit young men and women. “The whole point of this was to bring awareness, to say ‘look, we may have had breast cancer, but look what we are doing, look what we can achieve,’” Cockburn said. “It inspires people who are going through it, who have been through it and who are feeling down. They see this team who are out there and participating and are winning races.” Ongoing conditioning is extremely important to keep team members in top form. During the winter months, paddlers practiced at the edge of an indoor pool. The intense exercise helps breast cancer survivors to forget, at least for a while, the battles they have fought to survive. “You are conquering the demons you have in your head about it,” Heron said. “I have an anxiety disorder and once I hit that boat and I’m getting ready to paddle, my mind is so clear and calm. It’s one place that I know I can be that I am not anxious at all.” The team is like a sisterhood where members can cry, laugh, open up about their feelings and mourn the loss of members no longer with them. “It’s okay to cry, it’s okay to be scared, we understand,” Heron said. “Yeah, the fear is always there and even for the people who haven’t had a recurrence, it is always in the back of your mind when you go for your test. You eventually learn to live with the fear.” While team Knot A Breast offers support for its members during their journeys through diagnosis, treatment, after-care and at times, recurrences, it doesn’t strictly focus on breast cancer. “We haven’t let (breast cancer) take over our lives,” Cockburn said. “Yeah, it’s a big part. Breast cancer will always be a part of our lives, but you don’t let it take over.” For more information or to help support the non-profit team, visit www.knotabreast.com.