

BreastStrokes Offers Breast Cancer Support

Dragon boat team makes waves for cancer

By Lori Bona Hunt
Friday, October 21, 2011



Dragon boat enthusiast Mary Visser Kerr

People who work with Mary Visser Kerr, executive assistant in the Agri-Food and Partnerships Office, know that she is a woman of few words. Not surprisingly, she was speechless upon learning that she would receive the first-ever honorary life membership from the University's BreastStrokes dragon boat team.

The announcement was made during a recent team meeting. "I was blown away," says Visser Kerr. "I didn't know what to say except thank you, which is almost not enough to say."

Says team member Beverlie Nelson: "She shook for ages. It came as a delightful surprise and shock to Mary. Afterwards, she came up to me and said how much it meant to her."

BreastStrokes is a community outreach team within U of G's Department of Environmental Health and Safety. It's open to breast cancer survivors and support paddlers. The team competes in four to six races a year, including international festivals, most recently in Vancouver and Australia.

Visser Kerr has volunteered as the team's manager for more than a decade. During the racing season — May through September — she spends hours each week organizing events, travel plans and rosters, updating websites, recruiting paddlers, and handling paperwork and everything else required at regattas. Some planning efforts begin a year ahead.

“You just wouldn't believe how tirelessly Mary has worked for us,” says Nelson. “We couldn't do it without her; that is something echoed by absolutely everyone on the team.”

An employee in the Office of Research since 2008, Visser Kerr joined BreastStrokes after a close friend mentioned that the team needed an administrator. “I said I wouldn't mind giving it a try.”

Visser Kerr picks up a paddle from time to time, paddling as a supporter along with breast cancer survivors, friends and family members. “I had never been in a dragon boat before that, but now I'm hooked.”

She practises with the team twice a week during the season at Puslinch Lake, where BreastStrokes docks its practice boat. During the winter, the craft goes into a barn for storage and repairs.



The team has about 28 members on average, including about 15 breast cancer survivors. Participation varies, often based on how many team members are undergoing treatment.

“Whenever we do well in a race, everyone is just exuberant. It's a triumph, especially for the team members who are struggling a bit,” she says.

The team has lost four members since Visser Kerr joined. “It’s always a very emotional time when that happens.” That is when the team pulls together even more. “That is what is really wonderful about doing this,” she says. “Being part of a team — the friendships, help and support that you get from being part of this group.”

BreastStrokes is looking for new members for next season. For more information, call 519-823-0463 or visit www.breaststrokes.org.

<http://atguelph.uoguelph.ca/2011/10/breaststrokes-offers-breast-cancer-support/>

About

At Guelph is published by [Communications and Public Affairs](#). Please [Contact Us](#) with your story ideas and information.

For media questions, Communications and Public Affairs:
Lori Bona Hunt, Ext. 53338, lhunt@uoguelph.ca