

Boob Tour much-needed Breast Strokes fundraiser | Your community newspaper in Guelph, Ontario

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Submitted photo

For paddler Beverlie Nelson, the BreastStrokes dragon boat team is an invaluable organization that has helped her to move on with life after breast cancer. She hopes the community will support the team at an upcoming comedy night fundraiser.

By Jessica Lovell
Guelph Tribune



In a way, joining the local dragon boat team is not an easy thing to do.

“The initiation fee is quite high,” said Beverlie Nelson. “Get breast cancer.”

Nelson is in her 12th year paddling with the BreastStrokes Dragon Boat Racing Team – a dedicated group of women whose common bond is a breast cancer diagnosis and desire to spread a message of hope to others.

“Many people refer to us as rowing; I am quick to point out the difference,” said Nelson. “When you row, you are looking backwards. But with paddling we face forward, look ahead and avoid the obstacles in our life as we get on with living.”

Nelson spends her winters in Florida, where she can keep up with her paddling in the off-season. But even though she’s a long way from Guelph, she hopes to drum up support for the local team by sharing her own story and promoting an upcoming fundraising event the team has planned. The Boob Tour, a standup comedy show that tours North America helping breast cancer charities with their fundraising, is coming to Guelph on Feb. 28.

It’s an important evening because it is raising funds “to allow us to paddle, to become strong, and take control of our lives as well as spread the word that there is a full, happy, healthy, rewarding life after breast cancer,” said Nelson in an email.

Nelson’s own bout with breast cancer began in 2001 following the death of her father.

“I went to the doc and said, ‘I think it is stress,’ and he replied, ‘No, it is breast cancer,’ ”she said, recalling the shocking diagnosis.

“My feeling was, that’s the diagnosis, let’s do something about it right away and then get on with it.”

Surgery, chemotherapy and radiation treatments, and recuperating took a year out of her life. But during that time, she was already thinking about paddling.

“When I was undergoing treatment, the female oncologist at Guelph General told me about the (dragon boat) team. I remember saying to her that that was what I wanted to do,” she said.

After Nelson finished her treatment, an acquaintance introduced her to the team, giving her a copy of Lynn Willis’s book *Paddling with the Dragon*.

“I read the book from cover to cover within the hour,” said Nelson.

She then called the contact number on the back of the book and anxiously awaited a response. It took a day or two, but Nelson soon became a member of the team.

“I am a pain in the neck to the team,” said Nelson when asked to describe the role that she plays. “I come up with far too many ideas, all of them off on a tangent, it seems, so several of the

members work with me to tame me.”

She has also done some fundraising, chaired the team and helped to prepare documents to ask the University of Guelph to have Guelph alumnus Dr. Don McKenzie – father of dragon boating for breast cancer survivors – recognized with an honorary doctorate.

But to teammate Jean Hume, Nelson has been a valuable support.

“She can be very intense in her enthusiasm, but I can handle that knowing that she is not asking for anymore than what she herself puts forward,” said Hume in an email.

“I am just thankful that her first reaction to hearing of my breast cancer was to welcome me to an amazing team. She opened a whole new world as she encouraged me with helpful hints and support through my first attempts and recognition from my family that I was going to be a survivor.”

That moving forward into the world of survivors is what Nelson finds most compelling about the dragon boating experience.

“What I like the most about the team is that we don’t dwell on breast cancer in any way,” she said.

“We have put it all behind us and are moving forward in our lives.”

Moving forward in life hit a setback for Nelson when she went over the handlebars of her bike, doing a real number on her left elbow.

“The doc in Guelph wasn’t all that sure I would ever be able to paddle again,” Nelson said.

But paddle she has, sitting in the back of the boat just in case she needs to pull out of the water to rest.

In Florida, she’s paddling and swimming, building her strength to be ready to continue paddling back in Guelph when the boat goes in the water in May.

That will kick off the 15th season for the BreastStrokes – a team whose humble beginnings saw them practising in a church basement, sitting on chairs, paddling with broomsticks.

The team now has real paddles and boats, but is in need of a new practice boat as well as funds to cover operating expenses.

“We have to earn almost every last cent and pay for huge amounts on our own if we travel internationally,” Nelson said. “We have members who are single, retirees or on disability pensions who can’t pay for themselves.”

But she noted, “we are an all-inclusive group. No one is left out who can’t afford to paddle with us.”

The United Way contributes to the team, and a Trillium Foundation grant announced is helping with the purchase of a boat. The team also gets donations from other organizations and individuals. However, it’s hoped that the Boob Tour comedy show will bring in some much-needed cash.

The Boob Tour takes place Feb. 28 at 7 p.m. at the Italian Canadian Club. Nibbles and a cash bar will be part of the event. The event will also include a silent auction. Tickets are available at all Scotiabank locations in Guelph and Fergus.