



Breast Cancer Survivors Row Back to Their Lives

Rowing Group Helps Women Physically, Emotionally

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As the sun sets on the Charles River, and the reflections of skyscrapers mix with the fiery red of Fenway Park's Citgo sign, a team of eight rowers and their coxswain glide along the water pulling their oars.

Eight women row, copying the movement of the woman ahead, and reciting a mantra of "catch, drive, feather, recover, repeat," as exhaustion builds.

The scene might have been one of Olympian athletes in training, or a high school crew preparing for a meet. But these women are not Olympians, nor are they teenagers.

They are all breast cancer survivors.

"I'm luckier than a lot of other breast cancer survivors because I have rowing," said Beth Parkhurst, 58, one of the three original members of a women's group called WeCanRow, short for Women Enduring Cancer Row.

The women on the river share a common story of diagnosis and exhausting treatment. The strenuous activity is a declaration of survival and strength.

Anne Rogers, 58, co-president of the group, "initially went to a support group where people sat around" -- an experience she said only "helped a little bit." By contrast, she described WeCanRow as "the glue that put me back together."

Rowing to Recovery

The group was formed in 2002 by Holly Metcalf, a 1984 Olympic medalist in rowing. Her inspiration came after coaching a fellow rower, Dianne Cotting, who happened to be a breast cancer survivor.

Metcalf trained Cotting and other breast cancer survivors to form the One in Nine team that participated in the Head of the Charles Regatta. After that, Metcalf became a staunch advocate of rowing as a kind of therapy for other breast cancer survivors.

Rowing may not be for everyone, which the women of WeCanRow are the first to acknowledge. Still, they are proud of their shared activity.

"Being in the program changes you; you have to push yourself, you have to keep up," Parkhurst said.

Parkhurst's participation stands in stark contrast to the advice she originally received from a nurse shortly after her treatment course ended in 2002. The nurse gave her a long list of don'ts: "Don't lift more than five pounds, avoid repetitive movements, etc." If she did any of those things, she was told, she could suffer arm swelling and

pain from fluid accumulation, known as lymphedema -- even though the effect of strenuous exercise on lymphedema was unclear at the time.

Still, Parkhurst was interested in continuing the more strenuous exercise regimen she had started before her diagnosis. When she asked her oncologist about a more challenging routine, she was told that the recommendations she received were "based on zero hard research," Parkhurst recalled. As long as she acted under the supervision of a physical therapist, she could exercise as she wanted.

Having heard about the One in Nine team, Parkhurst sought out WeCanRow on the Internet and joined up.

And just as previous experience with cancer is no barrier, neither is age.

"Mid-50-year-old women, they don't necessarily find their own boundary and go beyond it," said Jeanette Millard, 54, another rower on the team. "And as a cancer survivor, a lot of people don't encourage you to push your limits.

"You can't stop rowing in a boat of eight people. You find your boundaries, and you go beyond them."

Rogers has her own version of how rowing motivated her.

"I remember, in the beginning, getting to that point of, 'Oh, my God, I'm either going to die, or I'm going to keep on rowing ... but I can't stop because there are seven other people in the boat,'" she said. "I don't think that I ever, consciously, got to that point and then beyond it. That is so empowering."

Other Breast Cancer Survivors in the Same Boat

The women may not be rowing just for their own benefit. Dr. Jennifer A. Ligibel, an oncologist at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, and Dr. Carolyn Kaelin, a breast surgical oncologist at Dana-Farber and a breast cancer survivor herself, worked with the group to study lymphedema in exercise.

Millard said she feels that through exercise, she is "doing something about [breast cancer]." Aside from offering the strength that comes from rowing to other survivors, she said she wants their experience to advance the understanding of breast cancer and survival.

Today, rowing is one among many rehabilitation options available to breast cancer survivors. In their time in WeCanRow, Rogers and her co-president, Phyllis Groskin, 56, have seen WeCanRow-Boston become a registered nonprofit with grant support, and sister WeCanRow groups form across the country.

Amid the steady splash of the oars, the women of WeCanRow are often too out of breath to talk about breast cancer.

And that could be precisely the point.

WeCanRow is "not a place where you have to talk about the things that you've been going through, but you can," Rogers said, adding that the camaraderie of the boat sets them apart from many other breast cancer survivor groups.

"When you have to be in a boat and totally focused on the person in front of you, you connect in a physical way, and you connect in a rhythmical way, and you also connect in an inside deep way with a group of women who come from the same place, and that is being breast cancer survivors," she said.



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