

Dragon boat racing brings hope to breast cancer survivors

By **Kaye Maloney**

Publication Date: 03/25/08

Assistant Features Editor

Faith brought dragon boat racing to Indiana.

"I prayed to help other breast cancer survivors at the end of my treatment," said Lisa Peters, the president of Indy SurviveOars. Indy SurviveOars is a group of breast cancer survivors who formed the first dragon boat racing team in Indiana.

The water sport originated in China and is characterized by boats with dragon heads that require 20 paddlers working in unison. Peters, a Purdue graduate, helped to form the team out of Indianapolis after hearing about the sport from her physical therapist last May.

The therapist was helping Peters with the lymphedema in her arm. The lymphedema, which causes swelling, developed after Peters went through several surgeries for her cancer. For many years it was believed sports like dragon boat racing caused lymphedema.

However, research in the past decade revealed upper body exercise improves the quality of life following a breast cancer diagnosis. The paddling involved in dragon boat racing is a rigorous activity, but it helped Peters' arm.

"With everything that happened," she said, "there is no way to explain it but God."

Before becoming involved with the sport, Peters was able to work through the surgeries and the chemotherapy. But the swelling in her arm became unbearable to deal with.

She found the answer through helping others.

Two months before Peters was diagnosed with breast cancer, she began the process of adopting two girls from Russia with her husband. Despite the diagnosis, they went through with the adoption during the six months of chemotherapy and 18 months of surgeries.

"They're just the best kids," Peters said. "We were faithful and tried to do this."

Peters spent her time with her new daughters, ages 7 and 11 when they arrived in the U.S., instead of dwelling on her battle with the cancer.

"I never had time to think about myself," she said.

Putting others first is the mentality Peters lives her life by. Helping to form the dragon boat racing team has been a way for her to help many people at once.

"I'm not the type of person who would talk in support groups, but I like the camaraderie with other women," she said.

With the help of team members, Indy SurviveOars is bringing awareness about breast cancer and allowing survivors to find support from their peers.

"This is a team sport, there's nothing like it," Peters said.

Even though the team's first boat arrived from China last week, they have been practicing their paddling in a high school swimming pool and bringing attention to their cause.

Meghan McDonough, an assistant professor of health and kinesiology, saw the formation of Indy SurviveOars as an opportunity to look at the social relationships created in a team.

The relationships on these teams create support networks, cause psychological influences and change women's outlook on life, McDonough said.

Peters has seen Indy SurviveOars grow to a team of 86 members who is launching their pink dragon boat on April 13 at the Geist Marina in Indianapolis. She wants to help build the team and be able to race more than one boat.

Even though Peters was instrumental in introducing the sport to Indiana, she doesn't see herself as the reason why the team formed.

"I put God first in my life," she said. "I don't like to take credit for anything."