

Cancer survivors to participate in Dragon Boat Festival

By Shelley Davis

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Above, Molly Livingston of Suwanee, front, learns the short, powerful motion used to paddle a 40-foot Dragon Boat at the Lake Lanier Canoe and Kayak Club with other members of a team of breast cancer survivors who will compete in the annual Atlanta Dragon Boat Festival next September. Left, the group of breast cancer survivors sit in the 40-foot dragon boat by the dock Sunday afternoon and learn to paddle the boat.



LAWRENCEVILLE — Life doesn't really seem so daunting after you've battled breast cancer, survivors say. That's why a group of about 20 breast cancer survivors, many from Gwinnett, are tackling a difficult project — training to paddle in Atlanta's annual Dragon Boat Festival at Lake Lanier. The goal, they say, is to encourage people who have been diagnosed with breast cancer to continue to lead full and active lives.

The women gathered on Valentine's Day at Lake Lanier for their first practice. By the end of the day, Lawrenceville's Ione Berg compared the group to the bobsled team from Jamaica.

"It was just rough because we'd never seen a dragon boat," Berg said. "But even though we'd never met before, there was a camaraderie between us. We'd all been there, done that."

Even though most of the women didn't know each other's names, they all climbed in the boat — which resembles an extra-long canoe — and just started to paddle.

Berg heard about the dragon boat team from her friend Molly Livingston, also from Lawrenceville. The two women have participated in several cancer walks together. Berg was diagnosed with breast cancer two and a half years ago, when she was 61. Livingston, the baby on the boat, was diagnosed at just 37. "Going out and doing this is just like cancer — the unknown. You're amazed at what you can do," Livingston said.

The Dragon Boat Festival is one of the three major Chinese holidays, according to Taiwan's government information office Web site. It's beginnings trace back to a desire to ward off evil spirits and pestilence by finding peace in one's life. The festival is highlighted by dragon boat races, in which competing teams row to the rhythm of pounding drums.

The festival has spread through the rest of the world, and arrived in Atlanta nine years ago.

The dragon boats are about 40 feet long and seat about 20 people. A dragon head attaches to the front of the boat and a tail to the back.

Beverly Booth, an Atlanta woman who is organizing the survivor group, said she's been thrilled so far with the group at practices.

"I still haven't really put together a 'team,' because it's going to take until about April to see who's serious about practicing all through the summer," she said.

The group hopes to practice until it's good enough to compete in what's considered the biggest Dragon Boat Festival in North America, Vancouver's Alcan Dragon Boat Festival, next year.

The 2004 Atlanta Dragon Boat Festival was originally scheduled for April 24 at Lake Lanier, but has been postponed until September to give teams more of a chance to form and practice, Booth said.