

Row Your Boat

from an interview on Life Matters with Geraldine Doogue

From breast cancer to dragon boat racing: Pamela Williams tells how she became involved with a rather unusual support group.

Published 22/08/2002

I'm 44 years old. In January 2001 I was diagnosed with breast cancer. The surgeon said he thought my survival rate was a very good one; he removed the cancer and also lymph glands from under my arm where the cancer had spread to one of the lymph glands, and I had chemotherapy and radiotherapy over a nine-month period. That finished in about mid-October the same year.

Q: How did you feel when you were first diagnosed with the condition?

I was very philosophical about it. I don't have children, so I think that the situation was a little easier for me, and I guess I have an understanding of life as a series of stages. So I considered that this was a new stage I was going into, and I'd see what happened.

I heard a woman from Canada interviewed on the Health Report on ABC radio. She was part of a team of women who had had breast cancer who were involved in boat rowing, called 'Dragons Abreast'. She was talking about the effect on her life and how enhancing the experience was. And it was just a very positive message - that women can regain and maintain their strength after breast cancer surgery.

So I set about finding out about this group. It existed in Northern Territory and Queensland but not in Victoria at that time. So I became involved and helped set it up in Victoria. It's now in every state in Australia. We compete in March in Melbourne in the dragon boat festival, and throughout the year in other states.

Q: So it's a group of women who have had breast cancer, who meet and row dragon boats together as a group and compete in races?

Yes. We have 22 people in a dragon boat. We sit two abreast in a boat, we each have a paddle, we have a drummer up the front who keeps us in time, and a person down at the back steering us along. We keep our arms up very high, and paddle deep into the water. It's a very vigorous sport.

We have two boats now competing, and of those 44 people, we have about 36 women who have had breast cancer in the teams; some of those women have had both breasts removed, some have had one breast removed. We've got one woman who booked out of a chemotherapy session and came down to paddle! We have one woman in the team who paddles, her husband steers at the back and the two children ride their scooters along the banks of the river and train, so it's lovely. We also have Bettina in the team, who's 78. She's a marvellous character who had a mastectomy 30 years ago, and so is a great model for all of us. There's absolutely fantastic spirit amongst this group of women.

Q: What do you think are the main benefits for someone with breast cancer in becoming involved in a group like this?

I just think it's the companionship of women who are interested in doing something. It's really about women who have taken the opportunity I suppose, to get back into their lives again. One of the women in my support group was saying the other day that she had not realised that she was as strong a person as she is, having come through the treatment, and having been able to cope with the treatment the way she has. She's realised that there's greater strength to her than she had thought. So it would be really nice to attract more women to this, and to send our message of hope to other women, that a diagnosis of breast cancer does not mean that you can't regain your quality of life.