

## Vancouver women part of dragon boat team of breast cancer survivors traveling to New Zealand

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Published: March 20, 2023, 6:03am

Updated: March 20, 2023, 7:55am



Members of the Pacific Northwest Pink Lemonade dragon boat team train on the Willamette River. The group will be one of several travelling to New Zealand for a dragon boating convention. (Photos by James Rexroad for The Columbian)

A group of two dozen women in matching shirts gathered at the Portland waterfront on a recent sunny evening, stretching and calling out chants to each other. They're part of a new dragon boating team made up of breast cancer survivors called Pacific Northwest Pink Lemonade — a joining of the Catch 22 team from Vancouver and the Pink Phoenix team from Portland.

Just as the sun dipped behind the buildings, the team pushed off into the Willamette River, singing together as they paddled in sync.

"Hey guess what?," Tamara Greenwell yelled out to her team. "We're going to New Zealand!" The boat erupted into applause and cheers. In less than a month, the team will be participating in the [International Breast Cancer Paddlers' Commission Dragon Boat Festival hosted in New Zealand](#) this year.

During a six-day festival, dragon boating teams of breast cancer survivors from all around the world will gather for a series of events and races. On the first day of the festival, the opening ceremony will include a parade of dragon boating teams.

"We will be representing rain," Paula Zellers told The Columbian.

Wearing raincoats and carrying umbrellas, the team will dance to the “Singing in the Rain / Umbrella” mashup from “Glee,” with choreography by teammate Leilani Naluai.

Gearing up for the festival and races, Pacific Northwest Pink Lemonade will practice three days a week until they leave in early April. When practicing together, the team moves like a well-oiled machine, their paddles aligning with power to push the boat across the water.

The dragon boating team is made up of 24 women: 20 paddlers, a caller and a tiller to steer the boat, along with two extras. The team of women, ranging in age from 43 to 82, have created friendships while paddling together, bonding not only through dragon boating but through their shared experiences as breast cancer survivors.

Through a double mastectomy, multiple rounds of chemotherapy and multiple rounds of radiation, dragon boating has provided comfort for Greenwell for the past year.

“Through all of that, dragon boating and this team has just been the fuel to my fire,” Greenwell said.

Her sentiments are echoed across the team, as the women work together and support each other.

“The people are incredible,” said Delores Goodrich, who has been paddling for two years. “Very inspiring, supportive, loving, encouraging — all of it.”

For these women, dragon boating has become a source of pride and empowerment.

The act of paddling itself helps many of the women to feel strong and regain a sense of control over their bodies.

After getting cancer in both breasts, Naluai struggles with lymphedema, leading to what can be a painful build up of fluid in the lymph nodes around her breasts. The motion of paddling while dragon boating has actually helped her systems, by working to circulate the blood, she says.

“When I got breast cancer, I was like, ‘Can I do athletic activities anymore?’” Naluai said. “Dragon boating said, ‘Yes I can.’ ”

Naluai, who is Hawaiian, has been helping the team prepare for the trip to New Zealand by providing education about Pacific Islander culture. Though she has never been to New Zealand herself, she has learned a lot about Maori culture and the many similarities between her own Hawaiian culture.

“All Pacific Island people, our ancestors and our culture is very important,” Naluai said. “I want us to focus on understanding and respecting the culture.”

After the festival is over, Naluai and her husband will spend a month traveling across New Zealand and learning about the indigenous Maori culture.

While the trip to New Zealand may mean different things to the women, across the board, it is a point of excitement and a time to showcase their strength as a team of survivors.

“The thing about dragon boating, especially when you’re a breast cancer survivor, you think you can’t do anything and then you find this,” Naluai said. “There’s a lot of things we do that we didn’t know we could.”