



Survivors Abreast and Peterborough's Dragon Boat Festival

A bit of history

In October of 1999, a local breast cancer survivor, Meredith Cosburn was encouraged by her friend (a member of the Toronto "Dragons Abreast" team), to do what she had done to help with her own recovery.

Join a dragon boat team! So that's what Meredith did. She recruited her Liberty Mutual Insurance co-worker Sherry Vaughn and 4 other breast cancer survivors to form the beginnings of a Peterborough dragon boat team. An article in the Peterborough Examiner called for 16 more breast cancer survivors to join them.

But why a Dragon boat Team?

Breast cancer survivor dragon boat paddling began at the University of British Columbia in 1996.

Dr. Don McKenzie a professor in the Department of sports medicine and an exercise physiologist, challenged the prevailing medical thinking that woman treated for breast cancer should avoid rigorous upper body exercise for fear of developing lymphoedema, a debilitating and chronic side-effect of treatment. Dr. McKenzie developed a program to determine the impact of exercise on breast cancer survivors, choosing dragon boat paddling as the epitome of strenuous, repetitive upper body exercise. He trained twenty-four breast cancer volunteers in a gym for three months, introduced them to dragon boats and taught them paddling techniques. At the end of the three-month season on the water none of the volunteers had lymphoedema.

Not only that, survivors found they were fitter, healthier and happier. They loved the camaraderie and support of their fellow paddlers. They realised Dragon boat paddling could become a means of raising breast cancer awareness and show that survivors could lead normal lives.

By January 2000 the "Peterborough and District Breast Cancer Survivors Dragon Boat Team" was 27 members strong and they were excited to learn how to paddle.

The Team soon adopted the name Survivors Abreast Peterborough.

Fundraising for equipment and raising awareness began right away with a float in the 1999 Santa clause parade, followed by an event at Portage place in January 2000 which included a "loonie toonie walk", where anyone wishing to donate money would stick their loonies or toonies to the tape on the floor. Donation jars were put in stores, and a hair cut-athon and benefit dance were also organized.

Training got started too! Meredith recruited Len Minty, an experienced paddler as coach. Later, Len and Meredith would inspire the idea of holding dragon boat races on Little Lake. Len was instrumental in getting Peterborough's Dragon Festival off the ground and served as Festival Race Director for the first 10 years.

During the winter months, thanks to the generosity of the YMCA, Len Minty arranged for the team to start practicing at the side of the pool using special, smaller practice paddles. The team's goal was to prepare for the real thing - dragon boat races in Pickering and the Toronto area.

The team still needed a boat and Dr. John Rowsom, then chief of surgery at PRHC, was instrumental in helping the team overcome this hurdle. He and three other doctors, Dr. R. Chenoweth, Dr. J. Scott and the late Dr. R. Jaroszonek, each donated \$1,000 for a down payment towards a dragon boat.

A story about the team published in the Peterborough Examiner sparked enough interest for Liberty Mutual to provide the rest of the money needed to pay for a dragon boat built by Glenn Fallis of Voyageur Canoe. The Holiday Inn then donated wharf space and the Chamber of Commerce offered free parking. Lawyer Bill Lockington volunteered free legal counsel to incorporate the team and operate under the hospital's umbrella. It truly was a community effort.

April 30, 2000 was the first time the team actually got in the boat. The community was on board right away and a special dedication was held with a traditional eye-dotting ceremony



The team's first race was in Pickering on June 10, 2000. Survivors Abreast finished their very first race (440 meters) in 2 min 39 seconds. To their surprise, Dr Rowsom was waiting for them at the finish line! They were inspired and an idea was percolating...

To raise awareness about breast cancer, Survivors Abreast marked it's first "Awareness Day" on October 21, 2000 by displaying its dragon boat inside Sears. The very next weekend, the team held it's first community fundraising event, a pink ribbon ball which raised \$21,850 toward diagnostic imaging equipment at the new PRHC breast assessment centre which officially opened in September 2000, one of the first centres in Ontario. And so, the festival goals of **Fundraising, Awareness, and Participation** were unknowingly being established.

2001 was a big year for Survivors Abreast. The team website was launched and inspired by Len Minty and Meredith Cosburn the team announced that dragon boat races would take place on Little Lake as part of the 3rd annual Great Kawartha Canoe-A-Thon. June 16th 2001 marked the beginnings of Peterborough's very own Dragon Boat festival. Referred to as Liberty Mutual's "Day on the Water", this community event sponsored by Liberty Mutual was organized by a few members of Survivors Abreast, the Canadian Canoe Museum (with Peterborough Green Up) and the Peterborough Family YMCA. It brought together 35 dragon boat teams including 4 survivor teams racing a 400 metre course, scores of canoeists to compete in events for families with children, and participants in the 3rd annual Great Kawartha canoe-a-thon featuring a course from Lakefield to Little Lake. Just over \$25,000 was donated to the Breast Assessment Centre.

The following year, Peterborough's Dragon Boat Festival took on a life of its own and has since grown to be a successful annual community event.

In 2002 the first official Peterborough's Dragon Boat Festival was hosted by Survivors Abreast with the help of some community volunteers. \$84,509.18 was donated to the PRHC Foundation in support of the Breast Assessment Centre. The event has since grown to be one of our communities' most anticipated events to kick off the summer.

Back then, the Draggin' Dawgs dragon boat team was a supporter team made up of spouses, sons, daughters & friends of Survivors Abreast team members who had been touched by breast cancer. Susan Miller, was inspired by her friend and breast cancer survivor, Lee Anne Willshaw, to be captain of the team. For several years, this dedicated group raced in Peterborough's festival and sometimes travelled to out-of- town festivals with Survivors Abreast, racing or cheering them on from the shore.

By 2007 the festival had raised over \$1million and the team was awarded a Civic award for community betterment. The new breast assessment centre at the Peterborough Regional Health Centre was completed in 2008 and was named the "Survivors Abreast Breast Assessment Centre". In 2008 the team received a Peterborough This Week Philanthropy Award.

Survivors Abreast travelled to Vancouver in 2005 in celebration of the Abreast in a Boat team's 10th anniversary and of Dr Don Mackenzie who founded the breast cancer paddling movement. This festival proved to be the very first International dragon boat festival for breast cancer paddlers. A second one was held in Australia 2 years later. These led to the formation of the International Breast Cancer Paddlers Commission (IBCP), a commission of the International Dragon Boat Federation (IDBF). A formal bidding process was introduced for the 2010 International festival, and Peterborough was chosen over 2 teams from England, 1 from Italy and 1 from New Zealand. 66 teams came from all over Canada, the US, Australia, England, Italy and South Africa. Survivors Abreast was awarded three Peterborough Chamber of Commerce Business Excellence awards that year. One for tourism, Health and Wellness and Marketing, and one for Promotions. The International festival has been held every 4 years since 2010. Survivors Abreast travelled to Sarasota Florida in 2014, Florence Italy in 2018, Waikato New Zealand in 2023 and will be attending the IBCPC festival in Aix les Bains France in 2026.



The Peterborough Festival Planning Committee is made up of 20 to 30 Survivors Abreast and community members who work on various sub-committees. As host team, Survivors Abreast ensures the festival goals of Fundraising, Awareness and Participation are met.

Peterborough's Dragon Boat Festival is 100% run by volunteers. It relies on their generosity of time and talents to help reach its fundraising goals. Countless volunteer hours go into planning the festival each year. When asked why? Volunteers overwhelmingly responded it's because they want to give back and make a difference...Plus it's fun!

Sponsors cover the costs of running the event so that 100% of the pledges and donations can go to the cause. A portion of the net proceeds help cover the operating costs of Survivors Abreast so that they can focus their efforts on the event.

2025 was another record year, raising \$400,104.01!! To date, Peterborough's Dragon Boat Festival has donated over **\$4.9 million dollars** to the PRHC Foundation in support of equipment to screen, diagnose and treat cancer at the Peterborough Regional Health Centre.

Survivors Abreast has grown over the years, and the Festival has evolved...But it's always been about Hope, Passion, Dedication, Community, Fun and Making a Difference, One Race at a Time.

PDBF 20th anniversary video - 2021: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QQQKdCE2ZT8>

Survivors Abreast historical video 2019: <https://youtu.be/ezNwkDO-Ne8>

Below is a brief accounting of the Peterborough Dragon Boat Festival, including the number of teams, the amount donated, the festival chair, and how the money was used.

Year	Number of teams	Chair	Amount donated	How the funds were used
2001	35	Meredith Cosbourn and a co-chair from the YMCA	\$25,000	See description in 2008
2002	50	Meredith Cosbourn	\$84,509.18	See description in 2008
2003	81	Meredith Cosbourn	\$158,592.10	See description in 2008
2004	96	John Gullick	\$175,123.57	See description in 2008
2005	104	John Gullick	\$175,300.39	See description in 2008
2006	95	John Gullick	\$216,889.50	See description in 2008
2007	94	John Gullick	\$235,778.75	See description in 2008
2008	100	John Gullick	\$202,966.65	The money donated in 2008 and previous years went towards a dedicated high-end ultrasound system, an AGFA mamoray daylight film handling system and upgrading 3 analogue mammography machines to digital mammography machines. When the new hospital was built and opened in 2008 the new Breast Assessment Centre was named after the team in recognition of the fundraising success and contributions throughout the years.
2009	102	John Gullick	\$223,650.43	Computer aided detection system for breast MRI imaging, workflow manager software, and a second sentinel node probe.
2010	101	John Gullick	\$222,488.21	Tissue processor and the PRHC Closer Campaign which was an initiative to locate a radiation facility at PRHC. Of note, the closer campaign was chaired by Survivors Abreast team member Margie Lightbody
2011	98	John Gullick	\$271,348.35	PRHC's radiation facility.
2012	87	Carol Mutton	\$223,257.84	Ultrasound machine
2013	77	Carol Mutton	\$204,138.48	Voice recognition system
2014	82	Carol Mutton	\$200,737.03	Software and workstations at the breast assessment centre.
2015	70	Debbie Keay	\$163,693.96	Year 1 of a 3 year commitment to raise funds towards 3 x 3D mammography
2016	66	Debbie Keay	\$196,468.50	Year 2 of a 3 year commitment to raise funds towards 3 x 3D mammography
2017	67	Carol Mutton and Michelle Thornton	\$182,518.58	Year 3 of a 3 year commitment to raise funds towards 3 x 3D mammography
2018	67	Michelle Thornton	\$211,238.32	2 x Tissue processors for the laboratory (\$188,000) /additional proceeds designated towards the SPECT-CT priority.
2019	62	Michelle Thornton	\$241,738.54	Cellavision – a laboratory system that performs automated digital cell mapping of bloodwork.
2020	Cancelled due to Covid-19	Gina Lee	\$58,871.26	Robotic IV Automation system (RIVA) that automates the process of preparing medicines for chemotherapy.
2021	Virtual due to Covid-19	Gina Lee	\$95,568.43	Diagnostic Ultrasound Machine for the Breast Assessment Centre
2022	40	Michelle Thornton	\$202,268.41	Year 1 of a 3-year commitment to raise \$500,000 towards cancer care at PRHC and helping to bring in 2 new CT scanners, replacing outdated equipment with state-of-the-art imaging.
2023	59	Michelle Thornton	\$290,025.18	Year 2 of a 3-year commitment to raise \$500,000 towards cancer care at PRHC and bringing a new ultra sound machine to the breast assessment centre and upgrading a current mammography unit to be tomosynthesis (3D) capable.
2024	69	Michelle Thornton	\$312,025.18	Year 3 of a 4-year commitment to raise \$1 Million towards cancer care at PRHC. (Previously a 3-year commitment of \$500,000). 2024 funds went towards Digital Pathology (supported by artificial intelligence) and Breast Seed Localization Technology.
2025	73	Michelle Thornton	\$400,104.01	Year 4 of a 4-year commitment to raise \$1 Million towards cancer care at PRHC. (Previously a 3-year commitment of \$500,000). 2024 funds went towards Digital Pathology (supported by artificial intelligence) and Breast Seed Localization Technology. Overall amount raised in the 4 year period was \$1204,422.78
		Total to date	\$4,974,597.81	