

Wednesday Nights Judith Strasser



I used to be a cyclist. For nearly twenty years, until I was diagnosed with stomach cancer, I thought nothing of climbing on my bike and heading out for a hilly ride of fifty miles or more. One summer, I joined friends on a five-hundred mile, week-long tour along the Wisconsin River. Another summer, I biked from Madison to Chicago and back. In 1999, I trained all summer so I could join my son on the Boston to New York AIDS ride. I participated in several century rides in Door

Then I discovered the TeamSurvivor Madison dragon boat program. I no longer remember how I heard about it, but when I did, I knew I'd have to join. For one thing, it was something to do on Wednesday evenings. For another, it would get me out on the water. Long ago, when I lived on Lake Mendota, I loved living on the lake, paddling a canoe along the shore. To stay connected to the water I tried rowing crew, but the competition made me feel like I was back in third grade gym class,

No matter, I thought. By the time of the Festival, I'd be recovered enough to paddle. And I was, sort of. In the morning race, I discovered, first, that neither my breath nor my energy was back to what passes for normal in my life these days. I had to take several short breaks during the three-minute (seemingly endless) sprint. And I also learned how fast my carefully-studied technique fell apart under pressure. But no matter. What a high! Still, I was happy that, either by chance or due to Nancy's subtle



County and rode the Wright Stuff Century, 104 miles with 5,000 feet of elevation gain in hilly southwestern Dane and Iowa counties.

Nearly every Wednesday evening from April through September, for almost all those years, I did the Wednesday Night Bike Ride: 15 to 30 miles through the lush Wisconsin countryside. Those were magical evenings, the sun low and golden, the barns glowing red, the Holsteins along the fences mooing their greetings as we rode past. Wednesdays were sacrosanct; they were my exercise, my route to sanity, my social life. I couldn't imagine what I would do without them.

Until I couldn't do them any more. Despite surgery that removed the primary tumor and 80 percent of my stomach, and more rounds of chemotherapy than I could count, the cancer spread – to my lungs. A tumor took up residence on my vagus nerve, the one that controls the larynx, and severely limited my ability to speak and breathe. Biking was pretty much out of the question; for a while, I could barely walk. Wednesday evenings held no magic, no joy.

uncoordinated, the last one anyone would choose for any team. Rowing crew was not the time to track a V of geese flying across Picnic Point or to admire the reflection of a thumbnail moon hanging over the water. I dropped out and took up biking.

I was afraid that dragon boating might be like rowing crew; that the other paddlers would be obsessed with winning races. And I wondered whether I'd have the aerobic capacity necessary to paddle. But my yearning for something physical to do on Wednesday nights overcame my worries. I discovered the TeamSurvivor women welcomed my participation, whatever shape I was or wasn't in. And I was thrilled, the first evening, to realize that I had enough breath to keep my paddle working until Nancy, our coach, called a break with the welcome command, "Let 'er ride."

I looked forward with eager anticipation to the Dragon Boat Festival in Superior at the end of August. By coincidence, both my grown sons and their young women would come along to watch. And then, a few weeks before the festival, I got pneumonia.

design, I was assigned to only one heat at Superior. I figured I'd have another chance to race at the Oshkosh regatta in September.

But that didn't happen, either. I came down with a second pneumonia just before Oshkosh, and on the race day I was still on antibiotics – in no shape to paddle or even root for TeamSurvivor.

There's always next summer. And if next summer doesn't happen for me, I have wonderful memories: a green heron that greeted us as we paddled our team's own dragon boat back to its Rutabaga home; the great blue heron that watched us work our way along the Mud Lake shore; the camaraderie with women who cared for each other more than they cared about winning races; the golden evenings, with the sun low and the swallows darting under the Beltline bridge to the echos of our call. ♪

Judith Strasser joined TEAMSURVIVOR Madison, Inc. in April 2008. Judith was a vibrant spirit and a strong and determined woman who thrived and survived. Judith passed away January 29, 2009. We will miss her dearly.

Building a Boat

In the summer of 2008 members of TEAMSurvivor Madison (TSM) paddled our *very own* dragon boat. This was the culmination of a six year goal of TSM whose mission is to provide women cancer survivors a variety of fitness activities, education and support as they take an active role in their physical and emotional well-being

TSM began our dragon boat program in 2003 using a borrowed Voyageur canoe. We paddled together weekly and participated in dragon boat festivals with other women cancer survivor boats.

In September 2007 local boat builder, Jim Caldwell, came to TSM and stated, "I want to build you a dragon boat." This led to a flurry of activities: working with a dragon boat kit vendor in Canada, finalizing a fund raising plan, and reaching out for community support. A major step was getting financial support from Bill Bathke at WPS Health Insurance to underwrite the construction of the dragon boat. Monetary donations from WPS and many others as well as the tireless labor of so many made our dream come true.

TEAMSurvivor Madison's dragon boat made her maiden voyage on July 23, 2008, with a grand entrance at a WPS Launch Party. As members paddled in, we were welcomed by many folks who helped make our dragon boat possible - WPS Health Insurance, Jim Caldwell, Rutabaga, TSM members, families and friends. To these folks and many others, TSM cannot thank you enough!

Look for us on the water next season in our beautiful purple dragon boat. And stay tuned for Madison's first dragon boat festival - hopefully in 2010. www.teamsurvivormadison.org

"Together, Women with Cancer Achieving the Extraordinary!"



Get a Custom Fit



Check out our booth for our portage packs and canoe accessories. We will also customize our entire line of hiking backpacks for a perfect fit.



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