



Paddlers in the Pink taking part in the first Breast Cancer Survivor Dragon Boat World Championships held here a year ago. Last month, they competed in a regatta in Brisbane, Australia.



Breast cancer survivors (from left) Lilian Chong, 43, Esther Sim, 57, Jean Leng Goh, 51, Peggy Ong, 63, and Shin Na, 40, have different stories to tell and different futures ahead, but all of them have battled the disease and emerged to join the team of Pink Paddlers.

A year ago, Paddlers in the Pink were on a high. They had just taken part in the first Breast Cancer Survivor Dragon Boat World Championships here in Singapore.

They didn't win a place in the top three teams but it was an achievement many of the 35 women didn't envisage making. A documentary telling their inspiring stories then followed.

A year on from the filming of the documentary and the buzz of being the home team in the world championship, the dragon boating women have continued with their battles - in and out of the water.

Last month, they competed in a regatta on Kawana Lake, north of Brisbane, Australia.

Back home, one of the women won the Classic MrsSingapore Universe beauty pageant, and another shaved off all her hair to help raise money for the Children's Cancer Foundation.

But, sadly, there have been other kinds of battles to face. Five women found their cancer had returned. One died suddenly, stunning all her teammates.

They had been training together since the team was formed in 2003. As rowing is good exercise for breast cancer patients, keeping the arms mobile and preventing the upper arms from stiffening and restricting movement, a number take it up as exercise.

The Paddlers discovered that it was not just a physical activity. They were like a family who understood what each member was going through.

So whether there are triumphs or tears, the women survive as a unit, supporting each other whatever comes their way.

She fought the good fight



American SUE ANN HIXSON, 64, had lived in Singapore with her husband Marvin for 24 years. She was one of the founding Paddlers in the Pink when the team was formed in 2003.

Her first brush with breast cancer was in 1995 and she had a recurrence earlier this year.

She was having chemotherapy treatment when she died, but it was not the cancer that killed her.

Teammate Peggy Ong, who had her first grandchild last month, as did Sue, recalled: 'Sue and I were so excited about becoming grandmothers in the same month.'

April, Sue's only child, lives in Campbell, California, and she wanted Sue to be with her when she gave birth.

On the flight to California on Sept 8, Sue died two hours before it landed. She was travelling alone. The cause of death was later found to be deep vein thrombosis, a dangerous clot which forms when blood pools in the legs.

Her grand-daughter was born on Sept 9 and named Susannah in her honour. Sue was buried in the country of her birth.

Back in Singapore, her teammates mourned.

Said fellow paddler Shin Na: 'Sue and I both found out around the same time that our cancers had recurred. I still think of her alive and on the team. I don't think of her as dead.'

Suzette Cody, who made the documentary of the paddlers, said: 'She was one of the few whose cancer had recurred, but she stayed on and showed the younger paddlers what it means to have passion for life during and after breast cancer, and if you have to battle against it a second time round.'

We will survive

Cancer victim to beauty queen

There was a rowdy crowd at the Miss Singapore Universe pageant held at the Orchid Country Club in June this year. The cheers of encouragement came from the paddlers who were there to support **MADAMLILIAN CHONG**.

The 43-year-old housewife was pushed into entering the Classic Mrs Singapore Universe segment for married women over 40. She said her teammates cheered so much the judges had to let her win!

She said: 'I didn't expect to win, but so happy, especially being a breast cancer survivor.'

Madam Chong had breast cancer in February of 2002. She had a mastectomy and, two years later, a reconstruction.

Why the delay?

'The most important thing was to get rid of the cancer first,' she said.

Aside from sashaying up the catwalk for her crown, she had to perform in a talent segment.

The song that she danced to was, of course, I Will Survive.

Staying positive with cancer

Travel agent **MS ESTHER SIM**, 57, hoped to make it to five years before she had a recurrence, but her cancer returned within two.

In April 2004, she had the cancerous part of her left breast removed. Chemotherapy and radiation followed but her body did not respond to any drug. The normal prescription of tamoxifen or herceptin was no use to her.

In December last year, the cancer was back.

'It was a shock to me. I couldn't believe it and went into depression,' she recalled. It was different from the first time. 'I was fine, and just got through it.'

To lift her from her dark moods, she talked to friends about her feelings, and relied on her faith. She prayed and pulled herself up again into a positive mindset.

Another operation followed to remove the lump but she avoided radiation this time.

She said: 'I found out that arteries in my heart were blocked. The doctors couldn't tell me if it was due to the previous radiation, so I decided not to risk it.'

'Cancer is enough. I don't want to have heart problems too,' she added.

So there was nothing to do but take care of herself. She started going to the gym and working out five days a week.

The single woman shares her home with Alice, her 'best friend, flat-mate and guardian angel!'

While Ms Sim took care of herself physically, her flat-mate took charge of her diet. She started juicing, using organic foods and packing lunches for Ms Sim to take to work.

Said Ms Sim: 'Even though I'm single, I have lots and lots of good friends and they are very supportive.'

She looks better than ever, they tell her, and she feels great too.

She says she had to take the recurrence seriously and do something positive to fight the disease: 'I had to look after my body with food, exercise and prayers.'

Meeting a hero

Breast cancer had a family connection for **MRS JEAN LENG GOH**.

She, her mother and her aunt all contracted it at the age of 45. All three survived.

Mrs Goh says in the documentary Pink Paddlers: 'I always teased my mother that I got her bad genes: her varicose veins and very thin hair. When I had breast cancer, I realised that my mother felt that she was responsible for it too. She hesitated to visit me in hospital for fear I would blame her. Of course, I don't blame her. It's the genes.'

It's been six years since she was diagnosed.

Now 51, the former housewife has a new job as a program management and transformation office administrator with SAP. She said: 'My motto is, have peace with cancer. I am in remission but there is always fear of recurrence.'

Mrs Goh took up dragon boating in 2004.

At a dragon boat event for 2,000 breast cancer survivors in Brisbane at the end of last month, she not only got to make new friends, but also to meet a longtime hero.

Dr Don McKenzie is a Canadian physician who undertook a study to debunk the myth that breast cancer survivors should not do repetitive upper body exercise for fear of lymphedema, or the swelling of the arm and chest area that may develop after breast surgery.

He formed the first dragon boat team for breast cancer survivors in 1996, called Abreast in a Boat.

Since then, hundreds of breast cancer survivor teams have been formed worldwide.

Said Mrs Goh: 'He said never in his wildest dreams did he imagine our dragon boating would have got so big.'

In one way, breast cancer has been good for her. She says: 'I was never so sporty before I had breast cancer. I feel happy and focused.'

A close shave

Retiree **MADAM PEGGY ONG**, 63, was one of the pioneering Paddlers in the Pink.

She signed up after hearing a talk by Dr Don McKenzie on exercise and breast cancer in Singapore.

She said: 'I am still paddling, but I didn't go to Australia this year as I was busy with my first grandchild.'

She discovered she had breast cancer 11 years ago, in 1996. Even though her tumour was at an early stage, she opted to have her right breast removed so she would not need further treatment.

With no chemotherapy, Madam Ong never had to endure hair loss - until she volunteered to shave it all off for charity this year at the Children's Cancer Foundation Hair for Hope event on July 1.

Her act raised \$2,400 for the charity.

She said: 'Friends gave me scarves to wear but people said I looked better with my bald head!'

Her hair has grown back but it will all come off again next July.

'Next year, I'm going to do it again, and try to persuade the group to go with me.'

Keeping up hope

Housewife **SHIN NA**, 40, started paddling a year ago after being diagnosed with breast cancer in 2005.

After a double mastectomy because she was 'being overly cautious', chemotherapy, radiation and a course of herceptin, she was declared cancer-free last November.

'I was diagnosed at a late stage so I knew, statistically, I was going to have a recurrence at some stage. The odds were high, but I didn't think I would have a recurrence for another 10 years or so.'

While paddling earlier this year, her chest felt swollen and painful.

She went for tests in August and discovered the cancer had spread throughout her chest wall and lungs.

'The average life span of a woman with metastatic breast cancer is 24 months, but that includes people who have had a recurrence after 10 years or more, so I'm probably on the low end of that,' she said matter-of-factly.

She knows she looks healthy, and she feels healthy too, having experienced no side effects from chemotherapy: 'It's a bit surreal. Everything is the same. I still have to drop my kids off at school. I still meet my girlfriends for lunch. I still have date night with my husband. But every week I have chemo and that reminds me I have cancer.'

Mrs Shin Na has a two-year-old son and a four-year-old daughter. Her daughter is aware that her mother has a serious illness.

Last week, she said: 'After you die, will you still love me and be my mummy?' Her mother's reply was: 'I'll always be your mummy and I'll always love you.'

Mrs Shin Na feels there is a difference with her cancer this time. The first time was a shock but, like every cancer patient, she thought she could beat the statistics. Now, the disease feels a lot more real, and she is under no illusions.

She said: 'I am going to die of cancer but still, there is hope and a lot of treatment available to me.'

She added, smiling: 'This is the part in the movie where I say 'I'm dying' but it doesn't seem real and here I am carrying on as if nothing is wrong; and nothing is wrong. That's why they call it the silent killer.'

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