

# Rowing to Recovery

Defying medical mandates, breast cancer survivor Diane Cotting '68 and the One in Nine team pull together

It started with a simple craving. Having completed her MBA Program at Simmons College, Diane Cotting '68 needed fresh air and exercise. Riding her bike along the Esplanade, she was drawn to the Charles River and its rowers. Four years later, in 1997, Diane and the Style Driven Rowing Club of Boston, an all-women's club, entered the prestigious Head of the Charles Regatta. Diane, a petite 5'1" whose only previous claim to athleticism was one year on the University of New Hampshire bowling and riflery teams, was hooked.

In April 1999 Diane casually told her Style Driven teammates that she was scheduled to have a small lump, discovered through a routine breast exam, removed. She planned to be back in a couple of days for the thrice-weekly 5:30 A.M. workouts. Teammates were by her side to provide comfort and support when she learned that she in fact had breast cancer.

Her treatment at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute's Gillette Center for Women's Cancers now began. Four lumpectomies, a lymph node dissection, a mastectomy, lung surgery, "a lot of reconstructive procedures," and three months of chemotherapy left her body ravaged. "My hair fell out. I bought a wig. All in all I had nine surgeries in eight months," says Diane. "Getting back to rowing as soon as possible was always my goal."

Headed to rehab, she was handed a list of "don'ts" to prevent lymphedema, a non-fatal but incurable side effect of breast cancer. Topping the list was rowing. "I was told not to lift anything over five pounds and that repetitive upper body exercise could lead to swelling, numbness, and/or infection in my arm and hand. Rowing is intense, my lymphatic system was compromised, I couldn't pull, and yet, I couldn't live without rowing," she recalls.

That's when Diane discovered the missing link in the post-surgical phase of recovery, the time she expected "to move from patient to healthy and active survivor." There were no certified physical therapy and training programs that matched her limitations as well as her goals.

"This lack has created a generation of women limited in their activities and use of their arms," she says, limitations she is now on a mission to correct. To meet her personal goals she developed a training regimen with her coach Holly Metcalf, an Olympic Gold medalist and founder of the Row As One Institute; her trainer Abigail Peck; and her Dana-Farber medical team. To help others in the recuperative stages of breast cancer, she founded Cotting Connection, Inc.

"Until I became involved in rowing, I knew nothing about teamwork," says Diane. "My wonderful husband, teammates, friends, family, and caregivers at Dana-Farber's Gillette Center pulled me through the ordeal. It was no time 'to go it alone,' and they were with me at every turn. It was hard - no - huge for me to reach out and let other people help me. I am here today to help others make strides to get well and get fit. It is a gift God has given me."

The Cotting Connection's mission is "to provide those enduring cancer with access to the recourses they need to facilitate complete physical and emotional healing." Diane's website [www.cottingco.com](http://www.cottingco.com) is designed to help women in the post-surgical phase of recovery advocate for themselves. It also includes inspirational stories of other breast cancer survivors

"We are making changes, small pieces at a time, and fundraising like crazy," she explains. "Financing from grants helps us build a database of healthcare providers, address physical therapy needs around the many different cancer surgeries, and create a governing board for healthcare, physical training, and certification programs in the area of safe rehabilitation."

To promote her program and the concept that "one can live a rich and active life after facing a life-threatening disease," Diane made a documentary about teamwork and extraordinary experiences of a group of breast cancer survivors, all rowers. Titled *One in Nine*, the film has won multiple awards in film festivals from New England to Florida. The story of the nine rowers, dressed all in pink, has also caught the attention of the national press.

Ten months after her final surgery, docks with Style Driven, training for the month before the regatta, she founded a team of women from across the country, who, announce that they were breast cancer

"I am here today to help others make strides to get well and get fit. It is a gift God has given me."

Diane was pushing off the 2000 Head of the Charles. A her own team with eight other like herself, wanted to survivors. Naming their boat

*One in Nine* to remind others that one in every nine women is diagnosed with breast cancer, they trained, raced, and pulled together for the prestigious regatta and its international spotlight. According to Diane, the *One in Nine* team set out to prove that with "courage, determination, and good coaching, breast cancer need not be a handicap, but a challenge to be faced and overcome." Rowing enthusiasts and viewers of the film agree.

So do the doctors at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. Diane's surgical oncologist Carolyn Kaelin, MD, is convinced that there is a connection between rowing and the reduced risks of lymphedema. Inspired by Diane's story, Dr. Kaelin signed -up for rowing lessons and is currently clinically following women rowers - those with and without lymphedema. She supervises conditioning classes for breast cancer patients and educates others in the medical profession about her finding. Coach Holly Metcalf has also jumped aboard offering rowing camps with activities adapted for cancer survivors.

Diane knew the risks inherent in a return to rowing, but according to a profile written about her in the Winter/Spring 2001 edition of *Paths of Progress*, a Dana-Farber publication, she says "nothing was going to keep her from rowing."

"Exercise is beneficial, but needs to be individualized for each patient," says Dr. Kaelin in the profile. "If a patient wants to get back to the same form of conditioning she did before, she needs to tailor that exercise program to minimize the chances of lymphedema."

Diane continues in *Paths of Progress*, "We want to give women in recovery an opportunity to rebuild their bodies, learn to trust their bodies again, and work with the inner strength they have found from battling this disease. After they leave the hospital and finish physical therapy, we want to help them get back to their regular lives stronger than ever."

"Rowing saved my life," she says. When she is not in her office designing employee benefit plans, or pulling on her oars, Diane is building Cotting Connection. "My heart is in this project. I am starting to see action with a new partnership developed between academic institutes and the cancer community. It feels good and it's the right thing for me."

In a later twist, "one in nine" also refers to the number of breast cancer survivors who suffer a recurrence. In 2001, one of Diane's *One in Nine* teammates was discovered to have a new and malignant tumor. Like Diane before her, she set a goal: to be pulling again in the *One in Nine* with her teammates.

"We do not need to be paralyzed by this disease," concludes Diane. "Through teamwork, dedication, and the *Cotting Connection*, a rich and unimaginable quality of life can be achieved."

If you are interested in a screening of *One in Nine*, or fundraising and awareness opportunities, please contact Diane at [dcotting@cottingco.com](mailto:dcotting@cottingco.com)

.....  
Excerpts from profile on Diane Cotting that appeared in the Winter/Spring 2001 issue of *Paths of Progress* magazine, published by Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, are reprinted courtesy of Dana-Farber.

Special thanks to Paul Hennessy (Director of Publications) and Saul Wisnia (Publications Editor-Writer) of Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, and Lisa Sullivan RN, Cotting Companies, for their assistance with this alumna profile.