

## Boatload of Hope

One in Nine is a lifeline for this crew  
By Susan Bickelhaupt, Globe Staff; 10/18/2000

The hundreds of boats that will be launched this weekend in the Head of the Charles Regatta will include crews from colleges, prep schools, national, and international clubs. The guys in Yale T-shirts will row past the ones in Harvard T-shirts, who will row past the Wide Load Boat Club or the Halifax Rowing Club.

Then there will be the nine women setting out in the Masters Eight race on Sunday wearing pink T-shirts and riding in a boat called "One In Nine." The eight plus their coxswain came from all over the country so they have nothing in common geographically. What they do have in common is their physical history: All are survivors of breast cancer.

Some were diagnosed long before they started rowing, others developed it the middle of their rowing careers, and some are still undergoing treatment. But all are alums of the Row as One camps of Holly Metcalf, who acknowledged that, unfortunately, it wasn't hard finding women to fill the boat.

"We've lost three women since I started the camps in '94," said Metcalf, a gold medalist in the 1984 Olympics. "It's always hitting close to someone." The One in Nine name, in fact, refers to the chances a woman has of developing breast cancer in her lifetime, according to the American Cancer Society.

Metcalf said that, in addition to the Style Driven boat she coaches, she has put together a composite boat for the past five years made up of alums from her Row as One camps. The five-day camps held at Mount Holyoke College are for women from all over the country.

And while the Head of the Charles doesn't have any qualifying times, Metcalf requires that to qualify for the composite boat, the women had to complete a 4,000 erg [ergometer] test.

"They're selected both on time and on how they row." Metcalf said. I take into account their technique, and how I envision them fitting in with each other."

She'll get the women together today for the first time and determine seating positions for the fastest boat. Diane Cotting and Beth Meister are from the Boston area; the other women come from all over, including Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, New Jersey, and California.

Metcalf had been thinking of putting together a boat of cancer survivors for the past

few years, and the idea crystallized when Cotting was diagnosed in the spring of 1999. She had three lumpectomies, a mastectomy, with reconstruction and three months of chemotherapy, but was back in the boat last April.

Even so, the One in Nine women are not just cancer survivors, but serious rowers, Cotting, 50, has competed in almost a dozen regattas this year and rowed in the Masters Nationals in August.

These are people I've coached before who have rearranged their lives to come to a five-day camp and be more competitive. They are here to race," Metcalf said. They don't want sympathy or pity; they're showing other women what they can do."

Meister, 53, turned to rowing after she was diagnosed with breast cancer and had a lumpectomy followed by six weeks of radiation. Her daughter had rowed at the Winsor School, and mom had been relegated to serving food under a white tent on the banks of the river as her daughter rowed down it.

It wasn't until nine months after she had cancer that she decided to start rowing.

"I didn't realize how therapeutic rowing was until I started," said Meister, a psychologist. It's very difficult to row and completely exhausting, but as you're going through the exercises, and really applying all your energy, it feels really good, very empowering. It's painful, but at the end you feel really good.

"You are moving with other people, like no other sport. It's such a collaborative thing, that feeling of being with other people that anyone who felt isolated before really doesn't when they're rowing. And I think cancer really isolates people emotionally."

Cotting, who designs employee benefit programs, also said that the sport gave her a motivation to recover quickly.

I had a tremendous drive to get back in that boat by April 1 or they would need somebody else, and I would be replaced." said Cotting who rows in the Style Driven boat at the Community Rowing Center.

"The women might have a common thread, but it's not like they sit around discussing their disease while hoisting the boat or putting it onto the river.

They've all come to recognize the buzzwords, though, and don't need to say much when someone brings up tamoxifen, lymphedema or lymph node dissection.

Cotting said that being with other cancer survivors helps the women not just compare notes on drugs and treatments, but on physical limitations.

For example, she said. "We've all been told, 'you can't use your arms'" after your lymph nodes were dissected. "But hey. I'm carrying a portion of a 300-pound boat. I mean maybe I'll get lymphedema [inflammation] but maybe I won't. But we are convinced that by getting in the boat and staying strong, we recover faster."

Meister said she kept her lumpectomy private until after she started rowing.

"The boat sort of brought me public because by that time I felt I was on the other side of it," she said. And she's not bothered now by being in the spotlight as the boat with the women, who are cancer survivors.

"I don't mind how I'm seen," Meister said. This is something that's important to me, and I really don't care what people might think. All those people coming together, rowing in pink! I think it's a wonderful cause. I'm proud to be part of it."

Gillette, which three years ago underwrote The Gillette Centers for Women's Cancers at the Dana Farber Cancer Institute, is the main sponsor of the team and provided a \$50,000 grant to Metcalf's Row as One organization.

But Cotting said that other donations have been hard to come by, probably because so many walks and runs have popped up to raise money for breast cancer research (October is also Breast Cancer Awareness Month). Cotting did end up getting eight sponsors whose names will be on the sides of the boat.

I did a lot of fund-raising, and called a million places who said, "Oh, we give to breast cancer all the time."

But One in Nine's cause is not so much to raise money as to raise awareness, she said.

"This is a different thing because this is a highly competitive race. It's the biggest in the United States, and we are not a parade boat," she said.

Cotting admitted, though, that the pink T-shirts and sequined caps might attract the wrong kind of attention.

That's the other reason we're going to be great, because if you call attention to yourselves, you have to be good," she said. "People can look at us in pink, but I want them to see that we do this in a reasonable time, and that we're not just cute, we're kick-ass. We are."

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