



Diane Cotting survives rough waters to row again

Diane Cotting believes two things saved her life after she was diagnosed with breast cancer: Dana-Farber/Brigham and Women's Cancer Center and the sport of rowing.

The 50-year-old Bostonian received local and national media attention in October 2000, when she formed a team for the city's Head of the Charles Regatta consisting of eight rowers and a coxswain who were all breast cancer survivors. Naming their boat "One in Nine" - for the number of women who will develop breast cancer at some point in their lifetimes - Cotting's all-female, pink-uniformed squad was the inspirational story of the event.

What the television cameras captured, however, was only a small part of Cotting's tale. After feeling a lump in her breast during her monthly self-examination in April 1999, she endured four lumpectomies, a mastectomy, lung surgery, and numerous other procedures during the next several months. She missed an entire season with the Style Driven Rowing Club on which she competed, and feared she would never be able to participate in the sport again. When she did make it back a year later, she had a new appreciation for both the fellowship she found rowing and for her caregivers at Dana-Farber/Brigham and Women's Cancer Center (DFBWCC).

"I always had a goal to get back out there rowing," says Cotting, a 5-foot-1, late-blooming athlete with an infectious smile and iron will. "My Style Driven teammates pushed me to get through rehab, and while I was undergoing treatment, the doctors, nurses, and everybody from the parking attendants on down at Dana-Farber and the Brigham made me feel like I was the only patient they had. My husband, Norm, was also with me through it all."

Surgical oncologist Carolyn Kaelin, M.D., and medical oncologist Ursula Matulonis, M.D., oversaw Cotting's care at DFBWCC's Gillette Center for Women's Cancers, with Charles Hergreuter, M.D., of BWH performing her plastic surgery. According to Matulonis, Cotting's belief that "rowing helped save my life" was not so far-fetched.

"Those who are in better shape physically and emotionally tend to do better in chemotherapy," says Matulonis. "Studies have shown that exercise during chemotherapy does lessen side effects. For post-

menopausal women, keeping lean and trim lessens the chance of developing another breast cancer."

Psychiatrist Laurie Rosenblatt, M.D., of DFBWCC's Adult Psychosocial Oncology department says there are also documented mood benefits to physical conditioning that can help with a patient's recovery. "Cancer is a disease of multiple losses, be it the loss of hair, a breast, or your sense of physical integrity," she explains. "Conditioning is one way of getting their lives back."

Rosenblatt warns, however, that recovering patients often have less "reserve energy" than before their cancer treatment - and should act accordingly. Another major risk for breast cancer patients is lymphedema, a swelling in the arm caused by excessive fluid build-up after lymph nodes in the underarm are removed or treated with radiation. Lymphedema is thought to be spurred on by repetitive motion, so Kaelin recommends patients consult with their physician before attempting sports such as rowing.

"Exercise is beneficial, but it needs to be individualized for each patient," says Kaelin. "If a patient wants to get back to the form of conditioning she did before, she needs to tailor that exercise program to minimize the chances of lymphedema. Once you get lymphedema, you always have it."

Cotting knows the risks and respects her doctors, but she says nothing was going to keep her from rowing. Now back with the Style Driven team, she is working with her coach, Holly Metcalf, and trainer, Abigail Peck, to develop a post-operative program for breast cancer patients that includes conditioning with rowing machines and a rowing camp where survivors can forge friendships through teamwork.

"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," explains Cotting. "We want to help them get back to their regular lives stronger than ever."

(Paths of Progress, Winter/Spring 2001)