

In the Dragon's Wake: VET, Breast Cancer and Brave Hearts - Journeys of the Whole Person.

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From one perspective this could be seen simply as a story of a group of women and a TAFE who, together, built a boat. That it was a dragon boat, with its colour and form, and that the women were in the main breast cancer survivors, makes the story, some might say, interesting and sentimental, but otherwise of no great significance.

That would be one perspective, but rather a narrow one.

"You gave us back our future..."

Brave Heart Participant



Introduction.

Before we begin to unfold this journey, we believe it necessary to make a disclaimer. Whilst this paper is being presented at a conference focused upon research into Vocational Education and Training, this is not, in itself, a research paper. We wish to make no pretence that this work is a study of, or some form of research into, the project we put before you. Neither is it, though the project is presented very much as an example of the great benefits derived from 'taking research off the shelf', either action research (or any derivative of such) nor based upon a careful study of the literature leading to a predetermined plan of action.

At most we might call this (albeit rather loosely) a case study, the purpose of which is to draw the VET community's attention to three points specifically: Firstly, the value of multiple perspective and cross-sectorial research and collaboration to appropriate judgment making by practitioners – this, at the levels of both planning and, perhaps more significantly, delivery; secondly the influence of this particular project (through drawing upon the above) upon the development and well being (both physical and emotional) of the individual participants and likewise the broader community; and finally, though perhaps foremost, that the project as a whole is worthy of deeper enquiry: either through the wealth of data already to hand (video footage, interviews, reports, and the like); or through emulation. And that this enquiry may itself be from various perspectives, of which VET is but one, community development another, and the furthering of our understanding of cancer recovery a third.

With an understanding of the above, we shall begin the paper with a brief overview of the project as a whole, its history, inception, delivery and key outcomes. This will then be followed by an outline of the 'why' of the planning of the project from three perspectives particularly: educational, community development, and medical. From this we shall discuss the delivery, and that which underpinned the particular actions and judgments taken in supporting the needs, from a whole of person perspective, of both the individual participants, and the group as a whole. Through this section the voices of the participants themselves shall be introduced and so leading us to the third area of focus, the influence of the project upon individuals, the group, and the wider community. Lastly we shall explore why the project was so successful on so many levels, including the suggestion that projects such as this need to have planned in a period of 'warm down' as much as warm up.

Having laid the plan however, we have no wish to engage you in a dry and cold document. Rather, this project was, and continues to be alive with much that can only be expressed as magical, serendipitous, joyful and enrapturing. And so perhaps a caution is due, for this is a project the influence of which is to draw others into its wake, as were those who gave her form, and indeed the surrounding community. To borrow from C.S. Lewis: be warned, She is not a tame dragon.

Sketch of a Dragon

Early in 2004 a group over fifty women afflicted by breast cancer from North East Victoria and the Albury Wodonga region came together for mutual support. Having raised funds by way of a daring nude calendar, the purchase of a Dragon Boat was proposed. It was then suggested that perhaps, with the support of TAFE NSW Riverina Institute, they could build a boat themselves. Supported by, and working with, volunteers, trade teachers, and consultants and coordinators from the Outreach and Disabilities units, construction began in July 2005. On Sunday, April the 8th 2006, these 'Brave Hearts' (the name adopted for the breast cancer support group) took their lady, blessed in traditional Chinese style, to water for the first time: to the cheers and tears of a crowd over 600 strong.

This remarkable journey captured the hearts and minds of a region, involved three independent TAFE institutes, (TAFE NSW Riverina Institute, Goulburn Ovens Institute of TAFE, Wodonga Institute of TAFE) and an astounding mix of regional and international industries and organisations. Clearly articulated by the participants themselves, the project changed the lives of all involved. It is a journey that engaged the students as whole people and demonstrated how TAFE and VET, through innovative engagement with communities, organisations and industries can bring about significant positive growth in mind, body and spirit: Likewise bring about positive growth and influence to the broader community. This, aside from producing perhaps the finest 12m long Dragon boat in the country.

But why build a dragon boat, whatever, it might be asked, possessed them to conceive of such a thing? For the uninitiated, dragon boating, as a sport

favoured by breast cancer survivors, began in Canada as a research project into lymphoedema by Don McKenzie in 1996. McKenzie held that through following special exercise and training programs women could avoid lymphoedema and enjoy full and active lives. This proved correct, with further studies providing evidence that upper body exercise has a role in reversing muscular atrophy, activating skeletal muscle, stimulating the immune system and resetting the sympathetic tone of lymphatic vessels (McKenzie 1998; Piller & O'Connor 2002). 'Abreast' teams have since sprung up the world over – the Australian body being known as 'Dragons Abreast'.

The acquisition of a dragon boat therefore had much to offer the group. Building one, or attempting to, however, was seen by some as, quite plainly, mad. No group in the world had taken such a bold step. Yet the idea took their imagination, with one woman confronting her questioning mind in the dead of night. Unable to sleep she got up and wrote a piece entitled 'Sink or Swim' as a means of "...getting it straight in my head why we were doing this":

...at some point after being diagnosed with cancer we all make a decision; am I going to sink or swim?... ...For me the decision to swim was made even before I realised there was a decision to be made. Lucky for me I am a strong swimmer! I know others who have struggled and changed their minds at times. And some people simply can't swim. For those people we now offer a boat. Not just any boat, but the meanest, fiercest Dragon Boat you will ever see!

*Sink or Swim
Brave Heart Participant*

Likewise this question of 'why' may be asked of the project developers. That the project evolved and gained its own momentum over time must be openly acknowledge. Indeed many participants reflect upon the project as to being drawn in its wake, needing to develop ways of being and doing beyond their usual 'comfort zone'. Yet in accepting the somewhat 'add hock' nature of working in the swamp and heat of action, the care and thought that went into the initial planning, based upon sound experience and a ready engagement with research and relevant anecdotal evidence, should not be understated. Likewise of the making of judgement calls by VET practitioners at the levels of coordination and delivery throughout the projects history. This understanding is particularly important should others wish to initiate similar programs. The following section therefore explores the reasoning behind the decisions made in establishing the project, doing so from three perspectives: that of individual support (both medical and educational); community development; and VET.

Conceiving of a Dragon

In Australia the risk of developing breast cancer for women under 75 years of age is 1 in 11 (AIHW, AACA & NBCC 2003). Although much has been done to reduce the incidence of, and the mortality rates from, breast cancer there are many unmet needs associated with the psycho-social impact of a breast cancer diagnosis (Girgis, Boyes, Sanson-Fisher & Burrows 2000; Bourke

2004). The trauma of experiencing breast cancer evokes a range of emotional issues not only in the life threatening diagnosis and the continual fear of recurrence but also in the body-altering treatments which affects their self image, sense of femininity, identity and confidence (Baldry & Walsh 1999; Bredin 1999; McGrath et al 1999).

In addition, many women report that there is a prolonged period of uncertainty and depression experienced following completion of treatments as they lose contact with medical support networks and try and regain some degree of normality in their lives (Bourke 2004; NHMRC 1999). Providing a supportive environment, mutuality and a sense of belonging in recognition of this was therefore an imperative in any projects that might be undertaken.

In 2004 these perceived needs were instrumental in the production of a very successful community calendar featuring fifty amazingly brave local women and two men, whose lives had been affected by a breast cancer diagnosis, in various states of undress. Highly successful as fundraiser and art exhibition, the project was the more important for the positive effects it imprinted on each participant: increasing their self esteem and confidence and enhancing their body image that had been so negatively crushed by their diagnosis and ensuing treatments.

With some of the funds raised it was suggested that a dragon boat might be purchased so that interested members of the group could compete against other breast cancer survivor teams across the nation in races organized by Dragons Abreast Australia. It was then proposed that the women could build their own boat with the aid of the Albury Campus of TAFE NSW Riverina Institute. Though many questioned their own capacity to achieve such a task, the newly formed Brave Hearts on The Murray Cancer Support Group astonished many by voting to accept the challenge. When asked individually as to why they chose to take up the challenge one woman responded:

...I guess it was part of my inner healing – and me confronting the fact that I was part of a “club” – one of which I didn’t ask to be part – but acknowledging that I was now a statistic – so why not a meaningful one!!

From a community development perspective, the project, even though ‘confined’ to twenty five women and eventually some fifteen volunteers, was seen as a means of creating a focal point, much as the calendar did: only one the product of which might capture the imagination of many more. At the same time offering significantly greater ongoing support of the individual needs, highlighted earlier, than did the calendar.

Establishing the project as an educational program was no less challenging: demanding significant risk taking on behalf of both the organisation (TAFE NSW Riverina Institute) and the individual VET practitioners involved. It was determined early that program would need to be coordinated by both Outreach and Disabilities services. It was crucial to the success of this project that these two units – the prior with its focus upon community engagement in

innovative VET programs, and the latter skilled in individual support and access – worked together collaboratively. In addition a network of volunteers was established: some of whom would work beside the women on the boat; others that would support them in sourcing, learning to paddle and ‘sweep’ (steer), a borrowed dragon boat.

For administrative purposes appropriate course modules had to be identified that reflected the work being undertaken. At the same time it was important that the project was ‘educationally sound’ in that knowledge and skill development was logically sequenced, and that this development took place in a secure and supportive environment. Likewise that the project as a whole needed to enable the development of the necessary physical strength so that participants would be capable of carrying out the work required.

Whilst delivery of the project is handled more fully in the next section, it is appropriate to outline here the perspective that informed the week by week planning of that delivery. For from this perspective the development of skill was seen, to borrow from Beckett & Hager (2002), as an organic act: accepting the whole person, their past, present and perceived future, as being part of this act rather than just their minds, or their bodies, independently. This perspective was critical given that only through such an understanding could the full influence of the emotive person and their context, as perceived individually and collectively, be acknowledged as a whole. And only through such acknowledgement could we offer the guidance appropriate to each. The purpose of this program, it was understood, was to offer, suggest, enable, alternative ways of being and doing (Costin 2003), rather than identified ‘competencies’. Here the focus would be upon the whole person imbedded in what would, it was believed, develop into a community of practice (Wenger 1998): not of dragon boat building perhaps (though arguably this did occur), but of cancer recovery support, and hence in this case, of paddling one.

The Birth of a Dragon

...The steps in building a boat? The steps are – you know nothing – you know a little – and you know a little more... (smiles and laughs...)

Brave Heart Participant

Building a boat is a mixture of art and science. As with both of these, it involves skilful doing and, particularly as part of a team, ways of being appropriate to the context. Even for those who have trod the path before, the steps described above are not far from the practice.

However from the outset it was understood by all that this project was as much, or more, about the physical and emotional development of the individual, and the ongoing development of the group, as it was about the building of a boat. Success hung on our ability to engage and acknowledge much more of the person than would perhaps be ordinarily the case in a traditional ‘trade’ class. In a broad sense our focus was very much the ‘whole person’, rather than narrow production relevant ‘competence’. The wellbeing

of each individual, the 'health' of the group, and developing links with the broader community and industry, was as important as the boat: for without either, there would simply be no boat.

Within these multi indicators of success there was a firm given: this could not be just any old boat, this had to be the best. Only in achieving the extraordinary would the efforts of these women really be fully acknowledged, and for many of them to understand their true worth and capacity to shine once again as whole people within their respective communities. Here then lay the balance: In pursuit of the 'perfect' dragon boat we could not risk the underpinning aims, yet to maintain, and to some extent gain, these underpinning aims, the quality of the boat was paramount. Failure to build the boat at all was never an option.

Given that few if any of the women involved had previously undertaken any form of wood work, let alone boat building, to successfully achieve such a challenge much skill development needed to be undertaken: Particularly in the safe and effective use of hand and power tools. From a skill development perspective this posed significant challenges, with risks and fears specific to this group. As noted earlier, following treatment, many women report a fear of resuming physical activities due to perceived risk of developing lymphoedema. And whilst physical activity was now deemed highly appropriate to recovery, these same studies highlighted the importance of training the body gradually and with informed guidance.

In the beginning the above stricture was adhered to by way of a progressive program of stretching, strengthening and aerobic exercises set by a physiotherapist. Early into the program it was suggested that these same outcomes could perhaps be more engagingly met through a Tai Chi set. Fortuitously, there lived in the region a practicing Tai Chi instructor who was also a lymphoedema trained physiotherapist (a serendipity factor that would arise again and again throughout the project). Volunteering her time for free, this practitioner conducted a half hour 'warm up' to each of the twice weekly work sessions. Notably, not only the 'students' gained benefits from these warm ups, the teaching staff and volunteers also reporting improved flexibility.

A project such as this also held a number of legal and logistical issues that had to be adhered to and or overcome. Each of the women involved, and the volunteers, had to complete what is known as their 'Green Card' (issued by WorkCover NSW) in order to work in the carpentry section. Likewise each had to be trained specifically in the various power and hand tools likely to be used. This training was conducted prior to work on the boat itself, although some of the latter was done using the boat moulds as a project.

The boat was built over the next nine months using a flexible attendance pattern of day/night classes to suit the group: the boat itself being used as both teaching tool and end product. Throughout, the relationship between 'teacher' and student' was deliberately blurred such that the group had differing 'leaders' depending upon context and activity: hence at times this might be the Brave Heart women themselves (this holds true for the various

levels of the project also, be it planning or coordination). As a guide, a scale replica of the boat had been made which acted as a guide for the women to aid them in visualising the specific task ahead at each stage. Given the high novice level of the participants with regards to all things boat building, each stage was carefully discussed and, where possible, demonstrated prior to activity beginning. The model's value to this process cannot be understated.

As with most construction projects, there were issues and problems that had to be overcome: material availability; equipment sourced; expertise, knowledge and skills obtained. Invariably the broader community were there to offer the support required. For example: much of the material was either donated or provided at cost by local suppliers; larger timbers were machined by staff of Wodonga Institute of TAFE; the hull, once fibreglassed (by the women themselves under the guidance of a volunteer from a local industry) was painted by staff and students of Goulburn Ovens Institute of TAFE (with the same staff instructing the students in the preparation work); the graphic design work on the boat, again conceptualised by the women first, was drawn by a local graphic designer, and then printed onto the boat in a last minute stand by a regional company using the same materials as that which is to be found on the latest Qantas airliners; the dragon head and tail were flown in by DHL in the final weeks from a Canadian company as split rough cut moulds (the first they had produced only days earlier). All of this was done invariably on a volunteer basis, often at short notice, and with the most humbling of grace.

Throughout this process it was understood that it was the women who must do the work. It can be proudly affirmed here that this was indeed the case. What is more, as one participant noted "...we surprised a lot of people with the high quality of the work that went into that boat." Guidance was provided by three highly experienced trade teachers working concurrently, one a retired plumbing teacher with extensive private boat building experience, the second, a retired welding teacher (who claimed never to have seen a boat), and the third (one of the authors of this work) a teacher of carpentry and joinery. Between these three a wealth of knowledge and experience was available to the group, along with a firm commitment to acknowledge the whole of the person rather than targeting narrowly defined competency 'acquisition'. Hence the Tai Chi sessions, hence the first skills development session was how to stand, and how to walk, and how to use and control body mass to guide, rather than to force.

Likewise, it may be argued, education, particularly adult education and VET, is an act of guidance: About aiding and abetting skill transfer as development, and overcoming fear – be it of failure or the perceived consequences of failure. Given the clinical histories of these women, what was astonishing to some observers was the speed at which many developed the skills. For example the hand plane, a notoriously difficult tool to master, was picked up and used with amazing agility by several women, one who spends most of her time looking into microscopes, another a nurse. Yet this was little more than encouraged skill transfer, promoted through acknowledgement of the differing needs of the women, differing as perceived by reflection upon the whole of

their person: their current state of well being (emotional and physical), history, background, skill levels, knowledge base, demonstrated learning styles, known support networks, and such like. Though often achieved intuitively, these critical, transfer enabling, judgements were underpinned by a combination of many years of experience and practitioner based research (see Costin 2003). They exemplified that which Costin (2003) described as the bricoleur practitioner: moving beyond skill as embodied 'knowledge', and hence procedural replication, towards skill as the fluid engagement of the whole of a person with a context as they make judgements unconstrained by field replicating practice.

Whilst it may be argued that the role of the VET practitioner responsible for the 'coal face' delivery is always critical, in this project it was the more so. As stated earlier, failure was not an option. Our focus was for the women to leave the project with a different, more empowered, sense of 'being', beyond any specific skill development. Through engaging fully the 'now' of its participants, both individually and as a group, the project was about creating positive futures: The project "...gave me the opportunity to use this frightening part of my life to actually feel good about the future" being but one of many comments fed back to us. This is something contemporary perspectives of competency and VET generally fail to approach. It was a given that the participants in this course were unlikely to enter the boat building industry, indeed some already had established and successful careers. Our task was to help them re-establish their identities at a higher level than that at which they had entered. This we believe we succeeded in doing. What was surprising, was that our 'dragon' seem to have an equivalent effect upon ourselves, and all those who were likewise drawn along in her wake.

When you are fighting cancer you place all your trust in your surgeon and specialists around you. It never ceased to amaze me the trust you guys placed in us. How you very simply showed us how to use a powerful tool and then said now you do it. Sometimes I doubted (for just a minute) that we could do something, but I knew that you believed we were capable of it, so I would always take up the challenge knowing that you believed I could do it

Brave Heart Participant

In the Wake of the Dragon

The idea of building a dragon boat represented Hope to me, that maybe if I could do this... ..I might just be OK.

Little did I know that the project would give me my life back, but only better...

Brave Heart Participant

"You gave us back our future...". This comment, and that above, sum together the many outcomes of this project, indeed it is the outcome that gives meaning to all else. Perhaps this is too great a claim, and perhaps, from a

physical and psychological perspective, at most we might suggest that through engagement with this project, and its extensions, participants were reacquainted with their 'sense' of future. But these are their words. And they send us a message. It is perhaps something that many of us who have not travelled their journey, or similar paths, could never fully understand. We will not attempt to interpret it for you, but perhaps through this section, and the words of the participants themselves, some part of its meaning shall be captured as the many outcomes and extensions of the project are explored.

Firstly of course there is the boat. The desire to make this the "...the meanest , fiercest Dragon Boat..." ever seen, has been transformed. Participants describing 'her' as "beautiful", "playful", "cheeky", "daring", "powerful", and "...very much a 'she' dragon". In all descriptions this boat is seen to be 'alive', imbued with, and embedded into, the life energy of those who built 'her'. The head and tail of the boat for example never stay in the boat shed, but are taken home by one of the Brave Hearts (who vie for the privilege).

Through building the boat themselves, and the copious media coverage this process attracted (radio, television, and print, in local, regional and national forums – the local television continue to use a clip of the launch in their news promotions) the final product has become a focal point around and from which many other activities and actions stem. One of the Brave Heart participants put it this way:

My first thought was that the tangible boat was not the most important outcome but the intangible stuff – bonding, confidence, support etc... ...I now think that the boat actually was important – if we had all made coffee tables instead it would not have been as successful. ...having an object at the end that now belongs to the group and the community and will be around for a long time is important. We have... ...picked up a number of new members who were not builders but have caught onto the enthusiasm and are now keen paddlers... ...the group will have a reason to keep in contact with each other. Even though a new coffee table would have been nice, the group would probably have disbanded at the end.

Whilst the boat may be the point of focus, the women and the influence upon them of being engaged in this project is clearly of greater import. The words they have used to describe their experiences are informative:

...achievement, empowering, uplifting, motivating, cathartic, bonding, strengthening, awesome, 'mind boggling', life-changing, 'confidence building' challenging, legacy, confronting, exhilarating, exhausting, satisfying, grateful, thankful, peaceful, spiritual...

And the list goes on. As does the influence they inform us of. In pursuing the words "cathartic" and "empowering", the following comments from two Brave Hearts are telling:

...(the project) gave me the opportunity to use this frightening part of my life to actually feel good about the future.

*You know I never, ever cried once when I had cancer...
...I have the most amazing feeling every time I paddle the boat.
It fills me a true sense of achievement, peace and so much serenity. I actually feel like crying every time I get in it.*

Likewise many reported an improvement in their day to day lives with a much more positive outlook – cancer is with them, “...but its no longer in control, I am!” being one Brave Heart participant’s comment. Others have noted that they are more outgoing and focused. In addition several have reported that both these outcomes have had very real and positive transfer into their workplaces and/or homes.

Yet from the outset the project was never about just 25 women and a boat. It was also about enabling community development, from within. Hence the import of the participant’s comments noted earlier about inspiring more women to come to the group as paddlers. Likewise about the project being ongoing. A reflection of the success of this element has been the awarding to Brave Hearts on the Murray Inc (itself an outcome of the broader, lead up, project influence) of the 2006 Albury City Council Community Award. Estimating crowd numbers is always difficult, but if the conservative estimate of over 500 people being present at the launch of the boat is anything to go by, then this too indicative of success at this level. Particularly so when those attending included people from all walks of life, representatives of industries and organisations that aided the project and a surprising number of people who it seemingly only incidentally touched. For many it has become an icon of the community’s capacity to achieve. Indeed, by the women re-establishing their identities and engaging the community in such a effective and influential manner, that it has enhanced that capacity.

The Dragon’s Wings

And so must come the question, “why did it work?”, more specifically, why did it work so well? Many of us have asked this question, aware that the desire to emulate the program may well be strong, either by us or others. Ultimately the answer is the people: all of them - from Head of Campus to Workshop Storeman. This statement being inclusive of the women themselves. Their zest, drive, willingness to face the challenge and joy of life as the project unfolded, inspired us all. Thus who led who remains a moot point.

Of the many words used in the attempt to analyse this issue “trust”, “commitment”, and “enthusiasm” are perhaps the most suggestive. There was trust for example at all levels of the program and by all its participants, both to each other, and their ability to perform whichever role they had nominated for. People were supported to do their best and do so well beyond any supposed boundaries suggested by their position or level of authority. As mentioned previously, leadership was fluid, with each ready to bow to the experience of the other as tasks dictated. There were, as one Brave Heart

participant put it "...no egos". At another level, one of the teachers made this comment:

...one of the ladies had just been through the chemo' and was sitting with the rest of us at coffee... ...till then she'd been wearing a beanie... ...then she just reached up and threw the beanie on the floor... ...I knew then that we had been accepted, she'd accepted us... (pause) ...and maybe something in herself as well...

This comment is also indicative of the commitment and enthusiasm these women held for the task: reminding us that some were still undergoing treatment during the course of the project.

In addition there were several other key factors that are best summarised in point form:

- Staff at all levels across the project had broad experience bases that went beyond their areas of industry expertise.
- Openness to flexible entry, attendance, and delivery approaches
- A determination to succeed was held by all participants
- High problem solving capabilities across the group
- A willingness to work beyond arbitrary boundaries
- The ability of staff to recognise skill/knowledge deficits and their confidence to seek knowledge and or expertise from outside the group.
- Openness of staff to see the 'students' as team members and hence a resource both of skills and knowledge to be drawn upon as needs demanded.
- All staff had read the "Hitchhiker's Guide", Rule One: Don't Panic!

Though whimsical perhaps, the latter point was a necessary survival mechanism. Very little actually 'went wrong' throughout the project, yet many hurdles had to be overcome, new directions taken: problem solving and initiative were skills in high demand. Gaining this mix of the 'right' people came about by two mechanisms: at the management and coordination levels, this was, blatantly, good planning – only those identified as holding the above attributes were invited; as the project progressed, only those with such attributes volunteered to come on board.

Likewise there was, at the outset, an evaluation of the support, existing and probable, derived from the early, 'calendar' project. This 'stocktake' providing both a level of assurance that success was obtainable, and a 'grounding' influence by informing the group of areas for which support would need to be obtained.

And then there is the boat. There is something less than tangible that seems to capture the imagination of those who encounter 'her'. This was so both during her 'birth' and after. Private enterprises, companies, media, all have been enraptured by her smile and stayed to lend a hand, or simply support through encouragement and applause. Most assuredly this 'less than

tangible' is highly emotive, indeed all those intimately involved found the power of this emotive element left a positive, but indelible, imprint upon their memories for life. It is not a project that shall be forgotten by any.

Which leads us to a caution for those would emulate projects such as this. In establishing the project there was due care to warm up the group, as much with regards to the task itself, as to individual days (or nights) of work. What was not done however, was to acknowledge the need for a project 'warm down': emotionally. The launch of our dragon was a day charged with emotion, joy of life, success, and sorrow for those not with us. It was the culmination of many months of hard work, both physical and psychological. The last three to four weeks had been particularly demanding in both these areas. And then it all stopped. No more classes, and TAFE NSW broke off for the mid semester (Easter) break. Each was left to rely upon their own resources to deal with their thoughts and emotions. Each, including staff, found this particularly difficult. Though no great damage was done, in hindsight we would plan this element more carefully. True, all courses come to an end, and a line must be drawn after which 'the student' must become independent. The question we pose is simply at which point to draw that line.

Some Concluding Remarks

From both physiological and psychological perspectives the influence of this project has been, unquestionably, positive. The results are supportive of research suggesting that the quality of life and well-being of a person undergoing cancer treatments is an important and integral part of a patient's recovery. Likewise that social support and a 'fighting spirit' appear to improve survival for women with breast cancer (Baldry & Walsh 1999; NHMRC 1999; Caulton 1996). Anecdotal, yet still notable, is the fact that, since the commencement of this project, no signs of relapse or recurrence of cancer were reported, nor of new cases of lymphoedema.

By their own words, and through the observations of others, building this boat has empowered the participants, many whom had hitherto felt 'powerless' through their cancer journey. They reported that they were able to regain some of the innocent, carefree happiness that was lost with their cancer diagnosis: the launching of the dragon boat publicly announcing the arrival of a wonderful, positive, group capable of inspiring an entire region. These women have thus become role models, giving inspiration to others to lead full and active lives following the physical and emotional limitations that a cancer diagnosis imposes. It has enabled the participants, and through them others, to move forward and maintain control in their lifestyle choices, spreading the message that there is life after cancer.

Even though our bodies are scarred and have important parts missing we can still go on and do Absolutely ANYTHING with our lives"

Brave Heart participant.

And so the word 'legacy', used by so many of the participants in describing the outcomes of this project, gains its full meaning, full power. Inserted into the middle rows of the seats in the boat there are six name plates. It is humbling to acknowledge the great wisdom and power of these women in confronting their own mortality in demanding that these names be placed here. Placed such that there is room for more as need arises, placed such that those the plates represent shall always be paddling with them. For these are the names of those Brave Hearts who did not live to see this magnificent dragon fly.

It was an awesome ride... ..the view from the top was incredible, and the ride down again was pure elation.

Be glad that you made a difference to our lives.

*My life has been divided into pre-cancer and post cancer.
Post cancer is simply the best.
Thanks a million*

A Brave Heart



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