

OPINION > OPINION COLUMNISTS

Dragon boat club cancer survivors looking for new dock



BOSTON, MA- FEBRUARY 21, 2020: Dr. Erica Bernstein and Kathleen Schnaidt, both cancer survivors and members of Wellness Warriors of Boston pose for a photo at the MIT Harold Pierce Boat house which is under construction on February 21, 2020 (Staff Photo By Faith Ninivaggi/ Boston Herald/ Media News Group)



By **JESSICA HESLAM** | Boston Herald

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Cancer robbed Erica Bernstein of her career and left her with chronic pain but the 49-year-old doctor has found strength and solace in an ancient Chinese sport.

Bernstein belongs to a dragon boat club whose paddling members understand what she's battling because they too are all cancer survivors.

"It's been able to keep me active, to strengthen other parts of me, to remind me of the joy in life," Bernstein told me. "It has been life saving."

Bernstein was diagnosed with breast cancer at age 35 and then a tumor was found on her right kidney. Years of grueling treatments and 11 surgeries followed, leaving her with severe pain and forcing her to give up working at a Boston hospital.

Life got better when Bernstein found Wellness Warriors of Boston, a paddling support group and dragon boat club for cancer survivors. Paddling and racing the 40-foot dragon boats has been incredibly healing and helped ease her pain. She races and paddles alongside her father, who is also a doctor and cancer survivor.

Now, the dragon boat club's future is in jeopardy after losing its longtime practice site on the Charles River at MIT's Harold W. Pierce Boathouse, which is undergoing extensive renovations.

The paddlers are desperate to find a new permanent home as the warm weather approaches. Training is especially crucial this season. For the first time ever, 26 members are heading to France in August to compete at the 12th International Dragon Boat Federation World Cup Championships.

"We know that exercise reduces our risk of recurrence by 30 to 40 percent, depending on the cancer," said Bernstein, who is treasurer of the nonprofit, all-volunteer club. "We'd hate to be in a situation where we can't serve our members because we can't find a place to practice."

Wellness Warriors called the MIT boathouse home since the group was founded 12 years ago. Paddlers were able to practice three times a week while MIT students were on summer break from May to September

The new ideal spot would be in the Boston area and include a live mooring for two 40-foot dragon boats, easy dock access, parking, public transportation accessibility and nearby bathrooms.

The group has grown to about 100 members, who range in age from 24 to 80 and have been diagnosed with 16 different cancers. Some were recently diagnosed while others are years out from their diagnosis. They're parents and grandparents, women and men. They're teachers, cops, musicians, nurses, scientists and retirees.

Kathleen Schnaidt, 66, was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in 2011 and underwent a major surgery to remove the tumor followed by six months of chemotherapy. She joined the team the following year and is among the dragon boaters heading to the France competition.

"We don't even talk about our cancers very much but we understand," said Schnaidt, president of Wellness Warriors. "You feel the strength in the boat of all of us together."

Schnaidt, who lives in Dorchester, said the club has boosted her self confidence and made her feel less alone. She's hopeful they'll find a forever home. "I'm not willing to see this team shut down business," she said. "We all survived cancer. We're going to find a way to make it happen for all of us."

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