

# Founder Wellness Warriors

## Peter Kai Jung Lew

1952-2020

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*Peter: our founder, our leader, our coach, our steerer, our friend.* Wellness Warriors would not “be” without Peter. We have had wonderful, hard-working volunteer leaders and team members since the early days of our floating support group, but the one true founder of the Wellness Warriors – formerly the Hope Boat – was Peter. As Director of the Boston Dragon Boat Festival, he recognized that there was a need for a local cancer survivor team. Peter told us that in 2003 there were few women’s teams and no cancer survivor teams. Then the breast cancer survivor team Cote-A-Cote (Two-Abreast) showed up at the Boston

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Hong Kong Dragon Boat Festival (BDBF) looking to race. After that race, he started encouraging local cancer programs to embrace dragon boating as an active support group. Peter approached The Wellness Community Greater Boston, hoping to start a cancer survivor dragon boat team in Boston. A door opened in 2003 when the Rhode Island Dragon Boat Festival included a special breast cancer survivor race with prize money attached. Peter encouraged future Wellness Warrior, Beth Parkhurst, to join paddlers from his reigning municipal challenge championship team, "Pride of Pawtucket." This endeavor paid off when the team went on to win a



\$1,000 prize. They generously presented their winnings to the executive board of The Wellness Community, who used the money to fund an all-cancer-survivor (ACS) team. By 2007 "Wellness Warriors" dragon boat club was established under the umbrella of The Wellness Community.

Peter's guidance through those early days and in the decades since has helped create a family of cancer survivors dedicated to thriving after cancer on the water. Our earliest members, mother/daughter duo Peggy Levesque and Natalie Bresnahan, remark that: *"Peter Lew's vision and perseverance provided many people who are fighting cancer with an outlet to help gain physical and emotional support while participating in a Dragon Boat Team. Peter is the HEART of dragon boating and our team, Wellness Warriors. Peter never gave up on his team members/ fellow paddlers and he consistently taught them the sport he loved with enthusiasm. Dragon boating gave members a purpose, positive energy, and confidence, while providing a distraction from all the pressures of cancer treatment. Peter Lew, dedicated, devoted, generous and kind, showed up week after week, year after year, for more than 15 years. When we joined, our team was small then, we didn't have a boat or a place to practice or even enough members to fill the boat. At that time it was named "The*



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*Hope Boat” and we practiced anywhere we could. Nevertheless, challenges never stopped Peter, he got us a boat to use and space at the MIT boathouse to practice, and he even found us friends to fill our boat for races. Peter was resourceful and knocked down the obstacles that got in our way. With Peter’s love, talent and determination he transformed our team and made his vision a reality. We now have our own boats that are full of cancer survivors and when we race, we*



*sometimes WIN. Part of life is showing up with a positive attitude and not quitting when someone needs you. Peter Lew did all that and much more for the Wellness Warriors. Peter Lew improved the lives of so many team members by caring and giving of his time, and knowledge, support and hope.”*

Wellness Warriors’ first President Nancy Passavant says: *“Peter gave us so many gifts. He gave us courage to try something we had never tried before. He gave us peace and beauty those nights of practice on the Charles River when summer breezes were soft and the setting sun cast a warm glow over Boston. How lucky we were to have that experience! He gave us comfort as friendships and support for each other strengthened with each passing season. He gave us stronger bodies and minds as he challenged us through paddling longer and harder than we ever thought we could. He gave us perseverance to become better paddlers. He gave us his love, devotion and caring. It is impossible to describe the thousands of hours he gave to our team – whether it was by building the team up, helping us to raise money and sponsorships, attending*



*meetings to help us grow and keep us going, running practices that extended from once a week to twice a week and ultimately three times a week, steering and coaching for us, and participating in health fairs and other events to invite new members. And this is just a partial list. Peter, we will miss you terribly and thank you so much for your kindness, your loyalty, your selflessness and your total devotion. You have – and always will have – a special place in each of our hearts.”*

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Wellness Warriors' first Captain Paulette Cournoyer remembers WW's first 2000 meter race at the Hartford Dragon Boat Festival: *"We were rounding the first turn (our team's first racing turn) and VT's Dragon Heart was overtaking us on the inside. As they turned, their boat's dragon tail swept over our boat, almost hitting a couple of us; we instinctively stopped paddling and our boat listed seriously to one side. Peter yelled out from the steerer's position "keep paddling". We quickly resumed paddling and our boat leveled itself. This is a fond memory because it reminds me of all that team and I have learned about dragon boating over the years. The techniques, strokes, safety procedures and paddling strategies that we have learned from Peter. I cannot enter or see any dragon boat without thinking very fondly of Peter. He taught us everything that we know and it is because of him that we are the Wellness Warriors."*



Peter not only took care of the team but he paid attention to the struggles of the individual paddlers. Patsy Lynch, a long time member of Wellness Warriors, says: *"One of Peter's many outstanding characteristics was his awareness and knowledge of each person on the team. Despite practice and hard work, I was never a superior paddler, but Peter always cheered me on. I found it especially challenging*



*to practice while I was having chemotherapy; he encouraged me to stick with it but to go easy on myself. Peter was there for me through my stem cell transplant, and gave me the first trophy our team won. Our coach focused on the needs of his paddlers, and never complained about what he was going through. Peter Lew: coach, friend, outstanding human being, fellow pilgrim on the journey."*

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Sheryl Mendlinger, an early member of Wellness Warriors, says: *"Peter gave us encouragement, a sense of belonging, and helped us trust our bodies through recovery. As many other teammates, I had never been in a boat or paddled and this was a new experience. I will*



*never forget that first night on the water, paddling in unison on the Charles*



*River with Peter as our coach, shouting out, 'eyes in the boat', 'all together' and put the fear in us with 'no talking!' I will always remember how honored I was when he attended my mother's funeral, even though he had never met her. That was Peter, he always found ways to give each of us that personal and individual attention, with a strong sense of caring, on and off the water. Peter's love of the Dragon boats and the Wellness Warriors will remain a part of our lives forever."*

We are so grateful for his passionate devotion to the sport and to us. Peter helped seed teams throughout New England and beyond. Apart from his role as Director of BDBF he was a tireless and generous advocate for dragon boating. Wellness Warriors' early Treasurer Marianne Alroy remembers him as a good friend, not only to dragon boating but to us all: *"I spent many hours in the car with Peter carpooling to races, or meetings. During these rides we had interesting conversations about anything and everything. He was very proud of his children and their accomplishments. Of course he loved to talk about dragon boating. We are grateful for his vision and the many ways he supported all of us. Foremost we remember him as a good friend."*



And as most good friends do, Peter supported and challenged us. Joan Pratt, WW Captain 2009-2017, remembers how Peter built our confidence: *"My first impression of Peter was his*

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*can-do spirit, which he passed on to all of us. When new paddlers arrived up at the MIT dock,*



*they were often intimidated by the awesome looking dragon boat, but Peter welcomed everyone and challenged them to try. His practices were tough, but we battled through them, working hard to gain his approval and to make him smile (and it is a great smile!). After I became somewhat confident with paddling, Peter again challenged me to try something new and steer the boat. It was daunting at first, not only learning the balance and technique, but also being responsible for the safety and the success of twenty strenuously working teammates. But thanks to Peter's urging, I persevered and gained his confidence, and my own, as well. Under Peter's guidance we all learned that we can do so much more than we realized, and we emerged from our*

*cancer battles with more confidence and team spirit!"*

Peter encouraged many of us to move into leadership roles within Wellness Warriors and stretch past our comfort zone. Laura Russell, previous WW Captain remembers: *"Peter's dedication, enthusiasm and knowledge of dragon boating was contagious and it showed in the number of teams that he started. Peter gave me great support and encouragement during my*

*first experience as a Race Coordinator for Wellness Warriors. This support gave me the courage to become a team captain a few years later. I enjoyed working alongside him designing tools to help with winter training*



*and planning new experiences for Wellness Warriors. But what I will miss most is our bantering in fun and baking cookies for Peter. Peter, you are loved by many."*

Peter dedicated the last 17 years to building and supporting our cancer survivor support group. He often referred to Wellness Warriors as a family. Erica Bernstein, one of the founding members, says: *Peter was the family member who always showed up, he was there for all the fun (practice, races, parties, potlucks) and he was there for all the work (recruitment*



*fairs, informational sessions, fundraising). We could always count on Peter to offer his expertise and insight. Peter gave without asking for recognition or expecting something in return. He just wanted to see us thrive. And thrive we have, Peter. We will continue to grow our family and strive for new challenges. And Peter will still show up... his memory will live on in the boat.*



Wellness Warriors' current President Kathleen Schnaidt's overriding thoughts are of gratitude: *"Peter, thank you for starting our team and for growing us and guiding us all these years. Thank you for your incredible vision, passion and dedication. Thank you for your counsel and guidance as well as your quirky humor. Thank you for being in - and enriching - my life, as well as the lives of countless others. You always had faith in us, and we owe you so much. We will always think of you with love and respect."*