



ESCA

Dragonboat festival for Anglo cancer victims paddles into second year

By Malcolm Curtis

Geneva - 28 July 2008 | 10:00

A unique fund-raising event at the Lac du Joux aims to help English-speaking cancer patients in the Lake Geneva region while raising local awareness about the chronic disease. The fall competition has attracted 44 teams, including multinational corporate sponsors, who will race across the lake in vessels originally designed in the Orient.

With team names like the Bosom Pals and the Breast Stokers you can tell these women have a sense of humour, despite the medical challenges they have faced. They are the breast cancer survivors among the dozens of participants - male and female - taking part in a unique fund-raising competition this fall. The second annual Paddle for Cancer Dragonboat Festival will feature 44 teams of 15 to 20 people racing on the Lac de Joux in the canton of Vaud. The September 7 event, launched for the first time last year, is organized by the English Speaking Cancer Association (ESCA), a non-profit group that aims to help Anglophones in the Lake Geneva region stricken with the malady and in need of help in a language they can understand.

This year the competition has grown to include 44 teams, many of them backed by multinational companies such as KPMG, Tupperware, Caterpillar and Cargill, as well as local Swiss firms and financial institutions like Credit Suisse, ING Bank, Barclays and JPMorgan. There are also squads from United Nations organizations and the International School of Geneva. " Last year was a huge success, attracting 1,500 people with 29 teams competing," Patricia Allen, co-ordinator of the festival and ESCA vice-president, told Swisster. " This year we have been overwhelmed by the response."

In 2007, the event raised 40,000 francs for the association, which donated some of the money to Geneva's local Breast Cancer Network and the pediatric-oncology unit of the cantonal hospital. This time round promises to be an even bigger affair. Eight " dragonboats," open vessels that are propelled by paddles through the water, will allow for heats involving up to four teams at a time, Allen said. The boats come from Zurich and France. There were fewer available last year when almost 500 participants took part in races - this year almost 900 people are expected to take part.

The rules require all teams to have a minimum of four women members with competitions divided into different categories. A race final with eight boats will determine the best corporate team, while another will crown the best " open mixed" team. Three all-women teams, including a group composed entirely of breast cancer survivors, will vie for honours in a separate race.

The ESCA, run by volunteers, offers professional counselling and operates a library and drop-in facility at the Ecumenical Centre in the Geneva community of Le Grand-Saconnex. The association was set up eight years ago by an American expat named William Faulkner, who was diagnosed with cancer. Unable to speak and understand French well enough to join a Francophone support group, Faulkner (who has since died) established an English-language one with the help of a pair of counsellors and a working group established through the American Church of Geneva.

The group has evolved over the past few years. At any one time it supports as many as 30 cancer patients in the Geneva, Vaud and French border areas with a goal of providing "emotional support, practical help and information in English," Allen said.

In addition to raising funds, the dragonboat race aims to boost awareness of cancer in the region. Allen, originally from the US, said education programs are lacking in Switzerland. For example, the "pink ribbon" campaign held every fall in North America to educate people about breast cancer, has no equivalent in this country, she noted. Yet, for reasons unexplained, the rate of the disease is very high in Geneva, perhaps in part because of early detection programs, she said.

The idea of using dragonboat races to promote cancer awareness was pioneered by a Canadian doctor in Vancouver. He used such an event - and the traditional Asian vessels - to disprove the then-prevalent theory that women with breast cancer should not exercise their arms, Allen said. He made his point and similar events are now staged around the world. The festival at Lac du Joux promises to be family friendly with activities for children, including a "mini-regatta" and a "bouncy castle." For more information check the website, www.paddleforcancer.ch