

## Reflections

On Monday 10 May 2004, I enjoyed a sunset cruise on Lake Argyle, WA with a bunch of new dragon boating friends. Watching the last rays of sunlight dance over the water as the colours in the sky deepened into fiery reds and burnt oranges signifying the end of another glorious day in the Kimberleys, I reflected upon the circumstances which had brought me to such a beautiful place and such a wonderful moment in time. It was hard to stop the tears welling up in my eyes as I looked at that sky, lost in my thoughts.

I was diagnosed with breast cancer on 28 March 2003 and underwent a lumpectomy on 31 March 2003. Like many, my surgery was followed by months of aggressive treatment with chemotherapy and radiotherapy, and by late October 2003, I had finished all of the "hands on" treatments. Now, I thought, for those five years of tamoxifen tablets.... 1 tablet, 2, 3, ... but who's counting?

I first heard of Dragons Abreast Australia while still undergoing my treatment and immediately knew that it was something in which I wanted to be involved.

I was particularly keen on the trip to Vancouver, Canada in June 2005 to celebrate 10 years of dragon boating for international breast cancer awareness, but there was only one little problem. I didn't know how to dragon boat. Grabbing the bull, or should I say, dragon, by the horns, I fronted up to my first training with the Brisbane River Dragons and Dragons Abreast on a hot, sticky Brisbane morning in January.

So many new faces, so many great personalities! .... and how would I remember the names? (I was still suffering from chemo brain, even on a good day)... How un-co could I be? No matter what I did, it just felt WEIRD! ... but I just loved it! Drenched and looking like a drowned rat and with wobbly legs and arms at the end of that first session, I was hooked.... and I was on that road to Vancouver.

Before Dragons Abreast, I had first seen dragon boating while visiting some ex-pat friends in Hong Kong in May 2002. They were training for the Stanley Dragon Boat Championships due to be held in the weeks after my visit. I thought, "this is such a bizarre and strange sport" and the many photos in my album taken that day are certainly testament to those thoughts.

Funny how things turn out! Now, only 2 years later, and more importantly, a little over 12 months after breast cancer, I am a Dragons Abreast Pink Lady!

We at the Brisbane River Dragons and Dragons Abreast heard about the Kununurra Dragon Boat Ord River Marathon via an email and, with many thanks to the efforts of Petra De Jong of Brisbane River Dragons (it's a great advantage to have a travel agent in the club!) and Sue Bowen of Brisbane Dragons Abreast, a

group of hardy, or perhaps fool-hardy, paddlers signed up for a quiet Sunday paddle of a mere 55km which was promoted as ....the equivalent of 20,000 sit-ups! Getting closer to the date, I kept thinking to myself... We must be nuts???

We opened the invitation up to other local clubs in south-east Queensland to see if anyone else would like to join us and some Gold Coasters, Joan from Broadwater Dragons and Vicky, Robyn and Mike from Burleigh Fire Dragons, signed up for our composite team as well. After a last minute hitch, which unfortunately saw two of our group, Sue Bowen and David Robinson, having to pull out, eleven of us all up ventured off to the wilds of the Darwin in the Top End and then onto Kununurra, WA. Amongst our group there were six Pink Ladies/Laddies - four survivors, Lyn Moore, Jo Parry, Rosie Loft and myself and two supporters, Liz Hollingshead and Klaas van Noord.

Some of us decided to travel to Darwin a little earlier so we could take in some sights. On the night we arrived, Lyn "Goldilocks" Moore enjoyed trying out lots of different beds in our dorm room in the Darwin backpackers before finding the one that was just right! Jo, Liz, Lyn and I went on a day trip to Litchfield National Park the following day with its magnificent waterfalls full to the brim at the end of the wet season and swimming in waterholes against the rush of the water coming over those falls. I knew I was in the Territory when I saw a sign on the side of the road that said, "Croc, Barra and Buffalo Burgers" and the familiar cry while we were driving through the Park was, "Look, there's a termite mound, and another... and another ... and another...".

Upon returning to Darwin that night, the four of us were welcomed by the Darwin Pink Ladies for a paddle at their training session. We also enjoyed the sausage sizzle complete with champagne, pink of course, held to celebrate various members' birthdays and anniversaries and our attendance. This was my first trip away with a group of Pink Ladies so it was great to experience the spirit of Dragons Abreast and be welcomed by new friends amongst strangers in a different city in Australia.

Our Brisbane/Gold Coast group rented a mini van in Darwin for the drive to Kununurra. We broke the trip up and stayed overnight in Katherine after a great cruise at the Katherine Gorges and dinner out with some of the Darwin crowd driving to WA, and headed for the long drive ahead to Kununurra on the Saturday. Bloated cows on the side of the road, road trains, toilet breaks and convoys of slow caravans presented the biggest concerns for the road trip. Of course, we had the obligatory photo at the WA border crossing and one of the highlights was when our driver, Jo passed a massive road train on the Victoria Highway after the Victoria River Homestead, to much whoopla-ing from all of us in the back of our mini van.

Arriving in Kununurra after the long day's drive, a teams' briefing was held in the resort's bar. Here we were presented with our essentials for the paddle which had been donated by the generous sponsors - tubes of sunscreen and bottles of water, and lots of them! We were also presented with our Certificates of Participation and Kununurra Dragon Boat Marathon T-shirt before the paddle. Was this in case we got eaten by crocs along the way, we wondered?

The evening before the Marathon, Kununurra and the Ord Valley Muster put on its finest with a wonderful concert, the Kimberley Moon Experience with the sounds of Wendy Matthews, local indigenous performers, James Blundell and the Darwin Symphony Orchestra, complete with fireworks from the lake, out under the Kimberley stars. Just magical! Even the thousands of bugs attracted to the lights of the stage seemed to hum along to the music and were enjoying the night. The Kununurra club had organized picnic hampers of treats for us on the night, which were greatly enjoyed and appreciated.

After the concert, it was early to bed and early to rise as the next day we would paddle 55km! This really is going to happen? We must be nuts! No, we ARE nuts! I think we were all a little anxious and morning seemed to come all too soon. Would we make it? Would the heat knock us out? Would we get burned to a crisp in the sun? Would we be attacked and consumed by crocodiles along the way?!!!

The scenery along the paddle course was unbelievable! Carlton Gorge was beautiful and the kaleidoscope of colours of the Kimberleys getting stronger as the day awakened was something that could not easily be forgotten. The cool river water tingled on our hot skin as we dipped our hands in the water and splashed ourselves on our breaks. One image I captured was Jo as stroke in our boat with the dragons abreast emblem blazoned across the back of her pink shirt with some magnificent scenery in the background.

Yes, we are pleased to say that we did see some crocs. Freshies are your friend, they told us! ... but that childhood adage came back to me, never smile at a crocodile, and I was going with the latter! We saw some nice smaller ones at a distance, but we were a little jumpy and saw lots of suspicious logs along the way. We also saw quite a large croc too. Actually we smelt it before we saw it - white belly and little legs sticking up, poor thing was dead on the river bank .... on the far side of the river and yet, boy could we smell it! That croc was long gone!

One moment from the paddle stands out for me. On the wide stretches of the Ord in the last section of the paddle, the film crew from the ABC Australian Story were buzzing over and around our heads in a helicopter, banking steeply and filming the dragon boats. What a wonderful sight that would have made to see the three boats heading strongly down the river and the hot pink of the Pink Ladies reaching across two of those boats with the Darwin Pink Ladies in one and our group in the Brisbane/Gold Coast combined boat!

What an amazing achievement for all participants to complete the Marathon, and without taking anything away from the others, especially so the achievement of the Pink Ladies whom took the challenge and conquered the Ord!

We were all very pleased to finish the marathon paddle. We couldn't believe that we had done it! It was quite an emotional day for many of us and the reality of what we had accomplished meant there were more than a few without dry eyes at the end. I was feeling a little overwhelmed myself and was thinking that I've actually done this. You see, I set the Ord River Marathon as my own personal challenge and a tribute to all of those who had supported me through my treatments and my first year post-breast cancer. I had only received my 12 months clearance on 8 April 2004, turned 40 on 15 April and, on 9 May, I participated in, and, am very proud to say, completed the Ord River Marathon.

Who would have thought last year that I would be able to do something like this and so soon after my breast cancer? From such adversity, great opportunities and moments have come and as an added bonus, I got to see the beauty of the sunset in the Kimberleys while enjoying a boat cruise with new friends.

A little over one year after breast cancer, I feel like I'm on top of the world and I know now that, we, Pink Ladies, can do anything! Just bring it on!

Paddles up ... and see you in Vancouver in June 2005!

Lexie Warren  
Old Dragons Abreast - Brisbane

PS: As Kununurra is near the Argyle Diamond Mines, I had joked all weekend about meeting a diamond miner. As luck would have it, the well-groomed young man sitting beside me on my flight from Kununurra to Darwin turned out to be a diamond miner on his way home from his two week shift in the mines. Of course girls, with a cheeky glint in my eye, I had to ask... do they get staff discount? Seems they do!