



## A Healing Journey

*Survivors and caregivers reflect on the cancer experience as Paddle for Life marks its 10-year anniversary.* By AMANDA MCCRACKEN

**AT DAWN ON OCT. 6**, a flotilla of 27 canoes launched into Manele Bay in Lahaina, Hawaii, leaving in their wake an unforgettable image of hope and unity.

This October marked the 10th anniversary of Paddle for Life, a two-day voyage in which over 300 people from around the world, ranging in age from 5 to 80-plus, paddle across the 'Au'au channel from Lahaina to Lanai in traditional outrigger canoes, camp under the Milky Way and return the following day for a cause — raising money for cancer.

However, Paddle for Life is much more than that. It brings together people who have survived cancer, those still fighting it and others who have lost, or may lose, a loved one to the disease. Much like fighting cancer, the voyage takes physical, mental and emotional strength. Each canoe carries 12 to 18 people who paddle the 34-mile round-trip journey, often alongside schools of spinner dolphins. The Paddle raises money for the Pacific Cancer Foundation, a nonprofit organization that provides research and support for those diagnosed with cancer on Maui.

Mihaela Ryer lost her husband, Tom, to gastric cancer in 2014. She flew to Maui in 2017 from the Big Island to symbolically release his name. She vividly recalls mile 12 on day one: “Our captain started calling the names of the loved ones for whom our crew paddled, ‘Next two sides for the grandmother, next for the cousin, the father, the mother, the husband, the brother-in-law...’ Their names were in our strokes. As I released my husband’s name in the ocean, in the swirl at the end of my paddle, it traveled with the waves, the wind, the currents and the tides. Letting go, I kept paddling.”

She feels that participating in the event allowed her to support and connect with a community of people, most of whom she had never met.

Paddle for Life follows the principle that the secret to a happy life is having good relationships (family, friends, lovers, community).

Last year, Gary Zakreski lost his wife of 46 years, Patricia, to appendix cancer. “I thought we were singled out,” he says. Zakreski traveled from New Jersey to paddle a canoe for the first time in honor of his wife. What he encountered was much greater than he’d expected. The voyage surrounded him with others who had experienced similar loss and were learning to live again. “Our team was really diverse in age, gender and ethnicity — like cancer. The disease has no bias.”

Zakreski’s 2017 canoe team included Lauri McCaulley and her 17-year-old daughter, Gina, who had a kidney removed due to cancer at the age of two. They traveled from Washington again this year but this time with Dale, Lauri’s father. They paddled in celebration of Gina’s remission and in honor of Dale’s current battle with cancer. Native Minnesotan Lori Auhll, 81 years old and all of 95 pounds, was the eldest person on board. She’d started paddling at 62 in Oahu. “I love the bumps,” Auhll said in between gently correcting her teammates’ form. Her paddle routine: elbow and knee pads on. Auhll, a melanoma survivor, participated in her fifth Paddle event this year.

Team captain Anela Gutierrez got involved with Paddle for Life in 2009 as a technique and skill coach for the Pink Paddlers — the original team — which was created in 2006

and made up of breast cancer survivors. She now also paddles in honor of her godmother and father, both of whom lost their lives to cancer. “In the canoe, we learn to work with one another and take care of each other during our voyages,” Gutierrez says. “When we are on land, the island becomes our canoe where we work together, and we support each other.”

One-year-old Sully Langeveld was the youngest person affected by cancer to be honored in 2017. His 5-year-old sister, Indy, celebrated her birthday during the Paddle alongside her father in honor of Sully. She was the youngest paddler. This year, they paddled to celebrate the now-2-year-old’s recent cancer-free diagnosis. He’d had retinoblastoma.

Nancy La Joy is the first source of support for many families, like the Langevelts, who are hit with a cancer diagnosis. La Joy serves as the executive director of the Pacific Cancer Foundation and is a powerful, heart-driven force behind the Paddle for Life event. It’s not just a job — it’s personal. Nancy paddles every year in honor of her father who passed away from lung cancer.

The man credited with starting this voyage is a world-renowned traditional outrigger paddler. Affectionately »

» Top to bottom: A canoe team poses for a group photo. LAURI and GINA MCCAULLEY take a selfie from their boat. An aerial shot shows the paddle boats lining the beach in Hawaii.



GROUP SHOT BY AMANDA MCCRACKEN; SELFIE COURTESY OF LAURI AND GINA MCCAULLEY; OVERHEAD IMAGE BY MATTHEW MURASKO

called Uncle by all who know (or know of) him, native Hawaiian Kimokeo, now 71, is a bit legend, community leader and spiritual guru all wrapped into one. To Kimokeo, everything is a lesson or a blessing. “Find the poi (a traditional Hawaiian food from taro root),” Kimokeo told Nancy in the middle of the ceremony among a tired crowd of over 300 paddlers. “It will be a lesson of patience for them.” Kimokeo, who has been paddling since 1957, says it’s about connecting the natural elements given to all of us: heavens, ocean and land.

Florida and Hugh Town, national paddle coaches from Vancouver, were a part of this voyage at its inception. Florida recalls a symbolic moment when her husband taught the original Pink Paddler women to respond to a tipped canoe. “They had to learn to right the canoe, get back in and start paddling,” she says. “‘Huli,’ the Hawaiian word for tipping or turning, is what cancer does to lives.” The voyage is a reminder of how to get back in the boat and keep paddling, she says. Sadly, Hugh died of advanced colorectal cancer. “The surgery was a success,” says Florida, “but the daily radiation and chemotherapy weakened him, and shortly after, that big, beautiful heart simply stopped beating.”

Although the event is full of heart-rending stories, humor keeps many afloat. Cervical cancer survivor Pamela Kim Harris paddles in honor of her parents, who both died of the disease. “My dad used to say, ‘Pammy, don’t rock the boat.’ And my mother would agree but add in a whisper, ‘That’s right. Don’t rock it. Jump out naked and tip the damn thing over,’” she says. “I miss them both. I promise to follow my father’s directions and politely ignore my mother’s for the good of all!”

Back on land, hundreds of paddlers join hand in hand during Hawaiian chants. A mile-long, 260-pound locally handmade ti leaf lei is carried from island to island as a symbol of peace. Island chiefs exchange gifts, and paddlers are serenaded by Hawaiian music and fire dance. Canoes are



👉 FRANK LANGEVELD poses with his son SULLY, who is a retinoblastoma survivor.

decorated with pictures of lives, taken by cancer, who are symbolically along for the voyage.

The canoes themselves are a metaphor for the voyage. For Polynesians, the wa’a (canoe) is a living, spiritual entity, originating from a tree in their forest, explains Gutierrez. The canoe is like a bird, or manu, that goes out to sea but always finds its way back to land. Manu ihu is the front, or male part, of the canoe that leads. Manu hope is the back, or female part, of the canoe,

which is considered sacred. Momoa is the ledge on the very back of the canoe where ancestors sit. This is one of the most important parts of the canoe because it is from these ancestors that guidance and safety is sought. The ‘iako and ama make up the parts of the outrigger, which bring balance. The phrase “He wa’a he moku, he moku he wa’a” means “a canoe is an island, an island is a canoe.”

This year, Jo Lozynsky, 68, participated in her third Paddle for Life as part of the Calgary Canoe Club Sistership team from Canada. When Lozynsky was undergoing treatment for breast cancer 14 years ago, paddling became medicine for both her body and soul. “This year, I paddle in honor of my own difficult but unfinished journey and in honor of two dear friends who completed their final journeys last summer,” she says. “I paddle with kulia i ka nu’u (strive to reach the summit) and ho’okahi ka ‘ilau like ana (wield the paddles together!)” 📌

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👉 Paddlers line the beach holding a mile-long ti leaf lei that is a symbol of peace.



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