



Fort Bend County News

Francez Arzu of Sugar Land is captain of Pink Phurree, a dragon boat team comprised entirely of breast cancer survivors.

KIM CHRISTENSEN: FOR THE CHRONICLE



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Sugar Land woman captains crew of survivors

By KIM HUGHES
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Sugar Land resident Frances Arzú will paddle furiously with her team members — other breast cancer survivors — in the Texas Dragon Boat Association's fourth annual Gulf Coast International Dragon Boat Regatta this weekend.

She will captain the Pink Phurree, a year-round dragon boat team now 25-women strong that practices on Clear Lake twice a month and competes regularly.

The Pink Phurree will compete against other breast cancer survivors aboard the Cajun Invasion from Lafayette, La. and the Draggin' Queens from Houston.

After the race on Saturday, she, along with dozens of teams from across the nation, will honor those who lost their battle with cancer.

Arzú, who owns a law firm at 9100 Southwest Freeway in Houston, was diagnosed with breast cancer in December 2003, when she was 39.

"My first thought was, OK, am I going to die? That's the standard first question," said Arzú, now 44. "Your head just starts spinning, literally."

Arzú had good reason to be afraid, as her aunt had died of breast cancer at the age of 32. But that was in 1970, and breast cancer research has come far since then.

Arzú underwent six months of chemotherapy to shrink two tumors in her left breast. She had a lumpectomy, followed by six weeks of daily radiation.

"I lost all my hair within the first 10 days of chemo," Arzú said. "But the hardest part, truth be told, was when I lost my eyebrows and eyelashes. I had to get cancer to really understand just how vain I was. I was actually drawing in my eyebrows."

Sibling support

During her ordeal, Arzú had a support buddy with insider knowledge of the world of cancer, someone she knew she could call in the middle of the night and who would always give her a straight answer.

RESOURCES

WANT TO GO?

- **What:** Texas Dragon Boat Association's fourth annual Gulf Coast International Dragon Boat Regatta
- **When:** 8:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Saturday and Sunday
- **Where:** Pasadena Lake at Clear Lake Park, east of NASA on NASA Parkway
- **Details:** www.texasdragonboat.com

dragonboat.com or
www.pinkphurree.org

Her sister, 49-year-old Isidora Arzú is a radiation oncologist at M.D. Anderson's facility in Richmond.

"It's very difficult when patients as young as she was come up with breast cancer," said Isidora, a Missouri City resident. "I was hopeful for her, yet afraid for her, even though I know there was newer technology that would help her."

When Frances Arzú completed treatment in September 2004, she received an e-mail from Bayshore Medical Center, 4000 Spencer Highway in Pasadena, which was looking for breast cancer survivors to participate in a workout program.

"I had always exercised," Arzú said. "But I was having trouble getting it back together after treatment. Chemo just takes so much out of you."

When Arzú checked into the program a little further, she learned that the exercise program was for dragon boat racing.

James Guzman, a physical therapist assistant and certified strength and conditioning specialist, began working with breast cancer survivors at Bayshore Sports Medicine and Rehabilitation in Pasadena.

"When we started the Dragon Boating Workshop, it was to help prepare breast cancer survivors for the actual rowing event out on the water," said Guzman, who now works at Clear Lake Rehabilitation Hospital in Webster.

"That meant teaching them a little bit about exercise, flexibility, core stability and sport-specific movements. It was free to any breast cancer survivor who wanted to participate in dragon boating."

Arzú, who had never paddled before "in any way, shape or form," was intrigued. "I love the water," she said. "I swim. I scuba dive. So I thought, why not?"

The first team Arzú joined was the Draggin' Queens, sponsored by Dr. Tim Yang of Bayshore Medical Center.

"That first year, it was basically a breast cancer survivor boat that was kind of a hodgepodge of a number of ex-patients we had treated," said Yang, a radiation oncologist. "After that first year, we had a couple of ladies who really enjoyed the paddling, so they established a core group. One of them was Frances (Arzú)."

The first race Arzú participated in was in 2005, and that's when she met a Canadian team of breast cancer survivors who had been paddling for 15 years.

"From that moment on," Arzú said, "I wanted a team like that, too."

With the support of Yang, Arzú created Pink Phurree.

"My thinking was, I wanted the ladies to have an opportunity to regain their entire lives — physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually," Arzú said. "Although we want to win, we do want to have fun at it."

Arzú said the Texas Dragon Boat Association, 4723 Waring Street in Houston, lets them use one of its boats. But what she dreams of is a sponsor so they can proudly put their name on a pink boat, sport pink life jackets, row with pink paddles — whatever it takes to gain even more momentum as a force to be reckoned with.

Her ultimate goal, she said, is to beat those Canadians — as long as everyone has fun doing it.