

Dragons Invade Water Festival!

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Saturday, July 20th, noon. Beaufort's Waterfront Park is a carnival today. Tents are everywhere with weird and wonderfully costumed teams itching to get out on the water and compete. It's the first full day of the 58th Annual Beaufort Water Festival...

Dragons are here in force, their colors flashing on the near-dozen racing boats awaiting their paddlers. The Jumbotron catches close ups of the wild get-ups, the drummers' head gear, the last minute limbering stretches of the racers. The first heat's competitors marshal at the starting gate and march, two by two, to the loading area where they are seated like warriors in their boat. The four boats in this heat then paddle over to the starting docks, line up and, at the starter's horn, launch themselves in a flurry of flashing paddles and fero-cious shouts towards the finish line.

It's a fast, furious, adrenalin-rush 250-meter race, right beside the seawall. The strokes set the pace, the drums pound, the coaches bellow instructions, the waters churn. On shore, the spectators scream encouragement to their favorites, the announcer calls the winner and the exhilarated dragon boaters all return to the dock so the next team can show their stuff, go for the gold, the team building, the bragging rights.

On July 20th, 24 teams will compete for medals during the hotly contested heats of DragonBoat Race Day. They'll be your friends, family, co-workers and people you've yet to meet. And they will all be fund racers for DragonBoat Beaufort's cancer survivor initiatives.

Dragon boat history

Dragon boating originated in China over 2,500 years ago. It's one of the fastest growing water sports in the world. Towns and cities form teams, practice and compete at festivals around the globe. It's fun, festive, crazy and rewarding for those who put on these one-day events. These festivals honor the Chinese warrior and spiritual tradition in 41-foot-long skinny "war canoes" with brightly painted dragon heads and tails. Twenty teammates sit two-by-two and paddle in

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sync to the beat of their drummer, which symbolizes the heartbeat of the dragon.

It's happening here!

The Water Festival's premiering of DragonBoat Race Day on Saturday, July 20th is Beaufort's chance to put on and support its own festival, to be part of the festival circuit and to add one more event to the calendar of happenings that draw participants and spectators to Beaufort.

Companies, organizations and individuals have responded to the search for sponsors, to back and to form teams to compete when the field of 24 teams races in heats of four boats throughout the afternoon. The exciting action takes place at the Henry C. Chambers Waterfront Park seawall with tents, teams in crazy cos-tumes, music, food and fun. Over 500 male and female competitors, plus their supporters and hundreds of cheering spectators, will be at DragonBoat Race Day. It's going to be a fabulous Festival for local and out-of-town teams showcasing Beaufort and adding to the Water Festival excitement.

For these races, life jackets, paddles and a professional steersperson are provided. In-water practice sessions are held the week before with emphasis on fun, technique and safety. Teams should have 24 members: 20 paddlers, one drummer and three alternates, aged 14 and up.

Cancer survivor focus

In 1996, a Canadian physician at UBC, Vancouver, created the first cancer survivor dragon boat team to promote physical wellness and psychological well-being following cancer treatment through this team-oriented outdoor support program.

Dragon Boat Charleston, DragonBoat Beaufort's mentor, made this their mantra as they built several cancer survivor/supporter and club teams over the past eight years. Charleston, and many cancer-survivor-focused teams, put on well-run and enthusiastically supported festivals once a year to raise funds for their cancer survivor missions. Proceeds from DragonBoat Race Day will benefit both DragonBoat Beaufort's cancer survivor mission and the Beaufort Water Festival.

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DragonBoat Beaufort is an all-volunteer, non-profit organization with a two-prong cancer survivor mission: to provide cancer survivors the opportunity to heal and regain physical and psychological strength through the teamwork and competition of dragon boating; and, one-on-one, to fill the gap for local cancer patients with needs they are unable to meet.

DragonBoat Beaufort sprang into being at the first screening of "Awaken the Dragon" at the 6th Annual Beaufort International Film Festival on February 18, 2012. The team includes male and female cancer patients and survivors, their caregivers and enthusiastic supporters.

Team members practice hard, welcome new members, help local cancer survivors heal and have even brightened a few last days. They recently won two medals in the Dragon Boat Charleston Festival, proving that no matter the effect of cancer on team mates and their loved ones, this sport brings a rewarding purpose and a worthy goal. One member said:

"Whether DragonBoat Beaufort is paddling aboard Braveheart, our boat, as a cancer survivor or as a supporter, cheering from the shore, rallying donors ...it's a sport that reaches out, emotionally, spiritually ...it makes everything seem better, makes you feel stronger, connected... it's both forgetting and healing..."

It's all truly good and can only get better with the community's involvement in events like DragonBoat Race Day. Come, get on board!