

KPSF Dragon Healers Celebrate 10 Years



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Almost a decade ago Medical Social Worker Kathy Pollonais-Britt pulled together a band of her fellow Kaiser Permanente colleagues, their family members, and friends to form a dragon boat team, the San Francisco Dragon Healers. The goal: To compete in the Kaiser Permanente San Francisco International Dragon Boat Festival, held each year on Treasure Island.

This weekend, September 20 and 21, the San Francisco Dragon Healers will compete in the event for the 10th time against a field of 120 teams from all over the United States and Canada. This year also marks the 10th year of Kaiser Permanente's sponsorship, the longest in the history of the event.

A 2,000 year-old-sport originating from Southern China, dragon boat racing came to the United States in the 1980s and is now an international sport, with teams and competitions all over the world.

It's the ultimate team sport, with 20 paddlers sitting two to a seat and pulling together, guided by a drummer and a steerer who calls out the strokes. "There are no superstars because no one person can move that 500-pound boat," says Pollonais-Britt, who has been the team's captain for 10 years. "We're all dependent on each other. It takes everyone doing their job and pulling together." And as for her role as captain? "I can't be a captain if I don't have 20 people willing to buy into my vision."

With 45 team members, 85 percent of them from Kaiser Permanente San Francisco and South San Francisco, the Dragon Healers represent the organization's diversity. "We speak five different languages. Our youngest paddler is 20, our oldest 65. And I'm the only black team captain in California," she said.

Some paddlers have been on the team for all 10 years while others just joined this year. They're doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and staff members from all parts of Kaiser Permanente—but those distinctions disappear on the team. "This sport is a great equalizer. We say, from Monday to Friday we do not care what you do, but when you get on this boat you're a paddler," Pollonais-Britt says.

The Dragon Healers go into this weekend's race riding high on the heels of numerous successes. Pollonais-Britt just returned last week from Ravenna, Italy, where she and two other team members competed in the International Dragon Boat Federation World Championship. And the team won two gold medals at Toronto's international festival in June, one of them in the hotly contested hospital challenge, in which they beat longtime rival Mt. Sinai, who had held the title for seven years.

The Dragon Healers also coach Balboa High School's team, one of 15 Bay Area high school teams. "It's great for kids because it teaches them to step up and become leaders," says Pollonais-Britt. "We change lives through this sport."

No experience is necessary to join a dragon boat team, just a willingness to learn and join in the spirit. "This is one sport where if you apply yourself, you can excel," Pollonais-Britt says.

It's also a great full-body workout. To move the heavily loaded boat, paddlers pull with the entire body, rotating from the core and using the legs as a powerful anchor. "If you complain after practice that your arms are sore, then you're not using good form," Britt explains.

The Dragon Healers practice on Lake Merced Monday and Wednesday evenings, and Saturday mornings from February to October. The team is always looking for new members, as paddlers take breaks due to work and life events. Contact Pollonais-Britt, Kathleen.britt@kp.org, if you're interesting in finding out more about the team.

And don't forget to come support your colleagues at the 19th annual Kaiser Permanente San Francisco [International Dragon Boat Festival](#). Admission to the event is free.