

**PORTLAND**

# Lesbian dragon boat team Amazons still paddling after 20 years in water

Updated: Aug. 11, 2012, 1:00 p.m. | Published: Aug. 11, 2012, 12:00 p.m.



By **Special to The Oregonian**



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**Jillian Daley/Special to The**

**Oregonian**

A few members of the Amazon Dragons Paddling Club, which celebrates its 20th anniversary this weekend, get together this week at the boat dock at Tom McCall Waterfront Park, including (from left) Jimi Barry, Jen Miller, founder Chris Mack, Sandra Lutz-Harden and Victoria Villa-Lobos.

Amid a heated political atmosphere, Chris Mack founded a lesbian team in 1992 to compete in the



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[Portland Rose Festival Dragon Boat Race](#)

[The anti-gay political efforts of the Oregon Citizens Alliance](#)

, a conservative political activist organization, helped inspire Mack to create the upbeat, highly visible team.

Mack and other gay women and men had been participating in the Rose Festival for a couple of years, entering a float in the

[Starlight Parade](#)

to foster a favorable image of the gay community. Mack, an all-around jock who played field hockey and basketball in college and high school, said she wanted to take part in the festival in another way.

"So, I thought: Why not do a dragon boat team?" Mack said. "They say exercise is good for you."

As a board member with the Lesbian Community Project, a now-defunct nonprofit organization, Mack gained the group's support and put together the Amazon Dragons. She's still not exactly sure how she hit upon dragon boating.

"It was a miracle; it was divine intervention. The queen Amazon struck me with a mighty lightning bolt," Mack quipped.

Whatever the inspiration, the team of Portland paddlers is celebrating its 20th season this weekend with social events and community service. The fete kicked off with a family and friends paddle Friday at RiverPlace Marina downtown.

Other reunion events are on tap Saturday throughout the city. Part of the Amazons' mission is a devotion to community service, and the team will cap off the weekend Sunday by volunteering at a fundraiser for

[Camp Starlight](#)

and the

[Audria M. Edwards Scholarship Fund](#)

. The camp supports children affected by AIDS and HIV; and the scholarship assists lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered youth pursuing higher education.

Jeana Frazzini,

[Basic Rights Oregon](#)

executive director, said being a part of the community and reaching out to people makes a difference in how others see LGBT people.

"That's really what changes hearts and minds, when people get to know real people, when they're not thinking of stereotypes, of misconceptions or a theoretical community but when they're actually seeing real people and neighbors," Frazzini said.

About five or six women attended the red-and-black team's first meeting, not enough to fill a dragon boat, which requires about 20 people, Mack said. Now, the club has enough members to fill two boats.

"It's amazing," said Jen Miller, an Amazon since 1998.

The team was founded as a lesbian team, but it doesn't discriminate. Jimi Barry is one of six Amazons who are straight, and she said her fellow Amazons are just "a great group of women."

The team is one of 36 members of

[DragonSports USA](#)

, a Portland club for dragon boat paddling teams that launched in 1994. DragonSports board president Darrell Hames said most teams don't last two decades, and the Amazons are among the oldest teams in his club. The sport itself is 100 times as old as the Amazon Dragons.

Dragon boating originated 2,000 years ago in China, according to DragonSports materials. The Chinese added dragon heads and tails to the prow and stern of boats out of respect to the dragon of the clouds, who sends rain to the crops, and the dragon of the seas, who can keep waters calm.

An international dragon boat competition held in Hong Kong in 1976 introduced the sport to the Western world, Hames said. Dragon boating came to mainstream Portland in 1988 at the Rose Festival.

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The Amazons have had fine finishes in the women's division of the Rose Festival Dragon Boat Race, snagging first place in 2008 and 2011.

"We are a force to be reckoned with," Amazon paddler Sandra Lutz-Harden said.

-- Jillian Daley

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