

Welcome to American Mosaic from VOA Learning English.

I'm Faith Lapidus.

On the show today, we play music from Queens of the Stone Age.

We also go to Los Angeles, to see how and why its growing its green spaces.

But first, we visit with a team of Dragon Boat racers in Washington, DC.

Dragon Boat Racers

Dragon boating is a team sport that has its roots in ancient China. The boats are decorated with a dragon head and tail. In recent years, cancer survivor groups have gotten involved in the sport to help make friends and help rebuild their lives. Avi Arditti has details.

On a recent Saturday morning, a group of 20 women were on a boat in the Anacostia River in Washington, DC. They move their paddles in rhythm to the call of a coach. The women belong to the dragon boat race team Go Pink! DC. Lydia Collins joined five years ago after finding out she had breast cancer.

“I love the team spirit, I just love everything about it. It is like a floating support group on the water.”

The paddlers are breast cancer survivors and their supporters. Annette Rothemel helped establish the group in 2006. She is a researcher with the National Institutes of Health as well as a breast cancer survivor.

“It is sort of an easy entry sport because on the same boat people at different levels can be doing the same sport.”

But Ms. Rothemel says dragon boating can be physically demanding, especially for someone who is sick and getting treatment for cancer. Rhonda Hartzel received chemotherapy drugs every three weeks.

“It is hard but I think you have to challenge yourself in life. This is something I look forward to. I get to be out here with my sisters and supporters that understand what I am going through and help motivate me. So it makes me stronger and it makes me feel better.”

Dragon boating began about 2,000 years ago in China. The modern form of racing started in the 1970s. Since then, it has become a fast-growing international competitive sport. Breast cancer survivor teams have competed around the world.

“I am sure it is in the multiples of hundreds. That must be three, four hundred teams around the world.”

Lydia Collins says there is a healthful result from the sport.

“When I’m paddling, it helps me with my lymphedema, which is a swelling of the lymphatic fluid when you have a mastectomy. Sometimes you wind up with this condition.”

Go Pink! DC trains weekly. It also races against other breast cancer survivor teams in dragon boat festivals. A pink carnation ceremony takes place at each event to honor those who have died from cancer.

“Unfortunately that is a sad part of having a team of breast cancer survivors. One passed away several years ago and another one this past January. She had been with us for a year.”

At a recent Washington dragon boat festival, Go Pink! DC won medals.

“We earned two silver medals, one in the 250 meter and one in the 500 meter [race].”

Annette Rothemel says the cancer survivors feel a sense of sisterhood and share good times when they paddle together. She says both feelings are treasured by the team.

Urban Parks

Public parks are important to city life, but green spaces and play areas are rare in many cities. In Los Angeles, several organizations and some volunteers are trying to change that.

At the Environmental Charter Middle School in the Los Angeles community of Gardena, several hundred volunteers recently built a play area. They sanded down benches, set up equipment like swings and slides, and added green plants, like shrubs and bushes.

Parent Jennifer Briseno says outdoor spaces (PR: bri-SAY-nyoh) are important.

“Everyone needs a place to play, no matter how old they are.”

School leader Kami Cotler says outdoor play gives kids get a chance to connect with the world.

“They don't have those opportunities to play with sticks in the mud, and to learn the really powerful lessons you learn when you get to do that.”

The remodeled Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County has also taken learning experiences outdoors. Exhibits now show insects, birds and reptiles in their natural environment. The new green space is a former parking lot. It represents a new direction for the museum, says landscape architect Mia Lehrer.

“You can enjoy the gardens, but also learn something, if you are inspired to.”

A study by the non-profit Trust for Public Land says Los Angeles is far behind such cities as Minneapolis, New York and San Francisco, in public park space. The group's Jodi Delaney agrees that outdoor spaces are important, especially for children.

“Many of them spend one percent of their time in parks, and 27 percent of their time watching television.”

She says parks are also important for adults, places where they find calm, exercise and get in touch with nature.

She says Los Angeles ranked 34th in the national study of cities and their parks. The study ranked 50 cities by such things as level of investment, size of parks and the availability of parks in all neighborhoods.

“Where we could do better is a little bit on access, and the Trust for Public Land is actually working shoulder to shoulder with city and county officials to improve that.”

An aid group called KaBOOM! built this school playground in the city of Gardena. The charity has built hundreds of other playgrounds around the United States.

Getting the community involved seems to be making a difference. Vaughn Sigmon is with CarMax, a seller of used cars. He brought 170 volunteers from his company. His company and its workers have promised to build a total of 30 playgrounds.

“It's the best place to get fresh air, get some exercise.”

Queens of the Stone Age

The rock band Queens of the Stone Age has been making music for fifteen years. But the group's newest album, "...Like Clockwork," is its first recording to reach the top of the American record charts. "...Like Clockwork" is the band's sixth album and was six years in the making.

Queens of the Stone Age dealt with many problems and delays producing the album. The lead singer, Josh Homme, had some serious health problems. He also dismissed drummer Joey Castillo, who had been with the band for ten years. Foo Fighters leader Dave Grohl filled in temporarily.

"...Like Clockwork" includes other famous guest appearances, including pop star Elton John. Some people were surprised he agreed to work with Queens of the Stone Age because his musical style is very different. He performs on the song "Fairweather Friends."

Critics are praising "...Like Clockwork." Several reviews note Josh Homme's mysterious lyrics and strong singing voice. And, fans are happy just to have something new from Queens of the Stone Age after years of silence.

We leave you with Queens of the Stone Age performing "My God is the Sun," the first single from "...Like Clockwork."

I'm Faith Lapidus. Our program was written by June Simms, Madeline Smith and Caty Weaver. Madeline Smith and Caty Weaver were the producers. Mike O'Sullivan and June Soh provided additional reporting.

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