

Catching fish comes second at this retreat

Reeling & Healing Midwest all about relaxing, bonding

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The fly-fishing queen does it all from the heart. Cathy Sero matches her sport with people dealt a lousy hand by fate and stands back to watch the gratifying results when they mingle.

Men and women with cancer sign up for her three-day Reeling & Healing Midwest retreats on the Au Sable River in Grayling, Mich., a fly-fishing paradise of national renown. They come with scars on their bodies and psyches, hair sacrificed to treatment and shy about how sickness has betrayed their lives.

She shows them nature, how to tie a fly and cast for trout and the beauty of standing knee-deep in cold running water under an umbrella of trees. They open their souls to strangers and after just a few days a river runs through them.

"I love water and I love the outdoors," said Suzanne Newman, 45, of Palos Heights, who attended a retreat.

Newman has been diagnosed with breast cancer but doesn't "want to feel sorry for myself and sit around. I wasn't so sure about the fishing."

Sero has fished since she was in diapers and fly-fished since she was 14. She has been a national champion caster, a fly fishing instructor for Orvis and a teacher at corporate retreats. She was a Chicago businesswoman in 1999 when she first volunteered as an instructor for Reeling & Healing Michigan, a program providing woody fishing retreats to women with breast cancer.



This labor of love is Sero's business now. A woman crying after catching her first fish at that first retreat changed Sero's life. Reeling & Healing became a cause, not just another gig. Participants are neither patients -- Sero is no doctor -- nor clients paying a fishing guide. Call her a nature whisperer, but one who has invested her own emotions.

Sero took over the program in 2005, changed the name to Reeling & Healing Midwest, and expanded it to include women with all cancers, plus men. Sero is supervising four retreats this summer, but the waiting list is long from Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan and Ohio for the 12-to-15 group slots.

Men and women who travel to Grayling are strangers upon arrival but can be tight friends when they leave. Sero exudes gentleness, not forcing anyone to take part in sessions if they feel they can't. The goal is to provide a relaxed, nurturing atmosphere where feelings might spill out and where no one will be judgmental.

Nerves are on display when "campers" pull up to the Gates Lodge cabins on opening day. Even cancer-free volunteers don't know what to expect. Pat Bock, 65, of Hickory Hills, said she had great trepidation but was inspired by the July breast cancer gathering.



"Being with women who had so many terrible things happen to them and then were so strong made me realize every minute of every day is special," said Bock, a water colorist who gave painting demonstrations. "It was the most wonderful thing I've ever done in my life."

Women who did not know each other on a Sunday were hugging by Tuesday. The fly-fishing, Bock said, was the conversation starter.

"It's such a beautiful, solitary feeling being with nature," Bock said. "There was healing, it was as if the water, the current, was taking away their problems."

The setting offered an opportunity for candor, Newman said. She has been in remission for four years and most people she knows have put their breast cancer behind them and don't want to talk about it. But she never stops worrying the cancer will come back, she said, and to talk freely about it was liberating.

"You're all in the same club together," Newman said.

Reeling & Healing is a small club, with a few hundred graduates, who are asked only to pay a \$25 fee. Equipment is donated, money is raised through car washes, T-shirt sales and donations. Newman did not walk away from the retreat prepared to become a professional angler.

"I caught a branch," she said. "I caught a tree. And I caught myself. Leg and leg, but no fish."

Yet Newman walked away with laughter in her throat, and that was the most precious gift of all.



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