

Fly-Fishing Retreats Provide Reflective Venue

Catherine Spader, RN

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The "fish on" mantra serves cancer survivors well; fly-fishing helps some survivors continue their fight.

(PHOTOS COURTESY OF REELING AND HEALING MIDWEST)

"Fish on!" It's the fly-fisher's motto -- the equivalent to Nike's "Just Do It!" But for participants of fly-fishing retreats designed for people with cancer, Fish On! is far more than a slogan -- it's a mantra.

"I became a cancer survivor the day I was diagnosed," says Kathryn Navin, RN, BSN, a staff nurse on the step-up cardiothoracic unit at Munson Medical Center in Traverse City, Mich. "Fish On! means I have a life that I need to continue, and that's why I'm still here."

Navin is a breast cancer survivor who has been a participant and a volunteer with Reeling and Healing Midwest, a Branch, Mich.-based nonprofit organization dedicated to providing women living with cancer with a one-of-a-kind experience that combines fly-fishing with nature, peer coaching, camaraderie, and support. The new-participant retreats offered in Michigan are open to women in any phase of cancer survivorship, from new diagnosis to remission.

Participants do not need fly-fishing experience to attend the retreats. Women receive expert fly-fishing instruction that allows them to discover a sport they can enjoy throughout their recovery and lifetime. The retreats accommodate participants who have a variety of medical and dietary needs and mobility issues. Retreats include services such as healing touch, manicures, pedicures, and massage.

Most important, Reeling and Healing Midwest offers a safe, reflective venue in which participants can share their disease and recovery experiences with other women who have cancer.

Volunteers and participants say magic happens in the fly-fishing environment. The retreats are where hope is kindled and spirits are renewed.

"There is something special about being in that rushing water, connecting with your spirit and with other women, and acknowledging where you're at in your life," says Navin.

Courage for the future

Navin attended her first fly-fishing retreat while undergoing chemotherapy after a lumpectomy. Today she is cancer-free, but every day she thinks about what her future might hold. Navin garners courage from the women she met at the retreats who had mastectomies. Through her relationships with them, she is not as afraid of the possibility of losing a breast as she once was. She relies on the power of the bonds she developed during the retreats to give her strength to face whatever may come.

"I know through my experience with Reeling and Healing that if the cancer were to come back, I will fight it as I did before and there will be special people along the way who will come into my life and help me through it, as they did before," Navin says.

For Navin, volunteering with Reeling and Healing Midwest has been as enriching and empowering an experience as being a participant. As a volunteer last summer, she was able to share her story and assure participants they were not alone in their battle with cancer. She also was able to offer her healing touch skills; some people believe healing touch reestablishes a therapeutic balance of body, mind, and soul. She says without regret that she was so busy accommodating requests for healing touch that she didn't have time to go fishing.



Amy Adams, RN, a staff nurse in the progressive care unit at William Beaumont Hospital in Troy, Mich., also has volunteered with Reeling and Healing. As a nurse and an experienced fly-fisher, she had much to offer participants at a recent retreat. She did not employ her technical nursing skills because most of the women were in remission. She did, however, have the opportunity to be a part of their continued healing, which, in turn, helps her grow personally and professionally.

"It was amazing how the women opened up and shared their past experiences and their feelings about moving on in their lives," Adams says. "This experience has helped me to look at the person, not just the patient. There's a person and a family behind every diagnosis. These ladies also helped me remember that I should be happy to wake up every day to see the sunrise and the sunset. At the end of the retreat, I thanked them all."



Retreat participants come from all walks of life, but their differences don't keep them from communicating their experiences and bonding, according to Catherine Sero, president of Reeling and Healing Midwest. "About 90% of participants have never picked up a fly rod," she says. "By the end of the experience, they own the fact that they have made big strides and have gone outside of their circle of comfort to experience something new, reach out to others, and be accepted."

For one retreat participant, catching her first fish was a life-altering experience. "With tears in her eyes, she said to me, 'I may be dead next year, and this means more to me than you can imagine. I want to go home and fight even more because catching the fish meant so much to me,'" recalls Sero. "Feeling the water between their legs, feeling the wind in their faces, hearing the birds, and knowing there's something bigger than themselves gives women strength and hope to go home and continue their fight."

Not just for women

Reeling and Healing Midwest also supports fly-fishing retreats in 11 states for men with cancer through a Needham, Mass.-based program, Reel Recovery. According to Stan Golub, executive director of Reel Recovery, fly-fishing retreats offer men with cancer a support group experience they may not be able to find anywhere else.

"Men aren't usually into retreats and support groups," Golub says. "They are often shy and not comfortable talking about personal issues in general. With Reel Recovery, the fly fishing is the hook that draws them in. But it's not all about the fishing. Men often go into the cancer experience feeling very alone. The fly fishing retreat is about camaraderie and the sharing of the stories about their experiences with cancer."

As they wade through rivers, cast their reels, and reel in the fish, men bond into a band of brothers.

"We offer an opportunity for men to change perspective about their cancer and gain hope," says Golub. "Bite the bullet, keep a stiff upper lip, take it in the chin -- it just doesn't work. Men need this experience just as much as women -- perhaps more."

Angling for volunteers

Reeling and Healing Midwest and Reel Recovery are organizations dedicated to providing people with cancer a chance to enjoy the thrill of fly-fishing while sharing their cancer experiences with others. Both groups are recruiting nurses and healthcare professionals who are interested in volunteering at fly-fishing retreats or want to develop similar programs in their area. Experience with fly-fishing is not necessary.

For more information, contact Reeling and Healing Midwest at (866) 237-5725, or visit www.ReelingandHealingMidwest.org. To contact Reel Recovery, call (800) 699-4490, or visit the website at www.reelrecovery.org.