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Group sponsors fishing "therapy" for women cancer survivors



News Outdoor Column

The mantra of the Lance Armstrong Foundation is "Livestrong!" Cathy Sero loves it when her new best friends shout "Fish On!"

At the opening and closing of each of her "Reeling and Healing" retreats during the summer, and of course when a nice trout strikes someone's fly, the cry of "Fish on!" sends Sero's spirits soaring.

Sero, now of Chicago, grew up tromping through Michigan's woods and along its watercourses.

"I was fortunate to be first-born to a father who hunted and fished. So I hunted and fished my entire life. About 10 years ago, he told me I should do something with my skills and talents. He meant he thought I should write."

Two weeks later, however, she discovered something even better than writing. Sero walked into the Orvis store in Chicago. One thing led to another and she soon became the first female fly fishing instructor in the Midwest. From that, the rest progressed naturally, like water from a brook gurgling gently on its way to become part of a river.

She started helping people with disabilities or recovering from trauma. One of the first of such clients she recalls was a woman whose hand was webbed together at the last two fingers.

"Before long, I had taught her the two-handed spey cast. She was having a blast," Sero said.

In 1997, "Reeling and Healing Michigan" was established, and Sero soon found herself volunteering. Now she is in charge of the group and in December 2005 renamed it to "Reeling and Healing Midwest."

On the surface, the work of Reeling and Healing Midwest seems simple. The group sponsors fly fishing retreats for women affected by cancer. Like the streams these souls learn to read, though, there is much, much more that goes on beneath the surface at the retreats. Bonds develop, and friendships forge themselves as each woman learns and practices new skills alongside others to whom she feels no need to explain herself. Everyone understands what everyone has been through.

"It's good therapy for everybody. Being outdoors. Fishing," Sero said.

Adds Rusty Gates of Gates Au Sable Lodge where many of the retreats take place, “For the women to be able to discuss what happens to them with their peers and what they’ve been through, it’s really huge. But the fishing and the learning about fishing is a new binder for them. Like flour and bread: the more you put into it the more you get out of it.”

The organization sets up two types of retreats. One is for new participants, both the newly diagnosed and survivors. The reunion retreats are for past participants.

“We are typically on the Au Sable” near Grayling,” Sero said. The group also sponsors retreats on the Pere Marquette River.

Retreats typically last two days, from Sunday afternoon to Tuesday. Such a schedule “helps out the lodges in slow time, and the rivers are less populated with canoeists and other fishermen.”

Gates notices that bonding seems to take place immediately. It doesn’t take long for participants in such retreats to go from being reluctant to—even complaining about—having a roommate to “beaming and grinning” because they understand how much they have in common.

“And they come here at the time of year when they can wade wet. A lot of fishermen miss out on that communal experience. Usually you’re wading with at least three layers between you and the water. But it’s comfortable to wade without the hindrance of waders and feeling the water against your legs. It’s a nice feeling they share with each other,” like group physical therapy. “Big time. Cathy does a nice job.”

Traditionally, an opening weekend reunion retreat is also held at the Wyandotte Lodge on the Au Sable mainstream.

“There are other similar organizations out there, trying to bring people together through fly fishing or fishing in general,” Sero said. For example Reel Recovery is a similar group for male cancer survivors.

The success of Reeling and Healing can be gauged in different ways. One is the sheer numbers of participants it attracts.

“People have come from everywhere around Michigan,” Sero said. “We have facilities that want us to take their cancer patients out and just fish. We want to do that, to expand. We have even had cardiac rehabilitation centers ask us to come in and help out.”

Sero herself is not a breast cancer survivor. She says she “just wanted to go out and help women.”

But that’s not to say she hasn’t taken something from the experiences. Just that it’s not as easy to measure as adding up the number of people who have participated.

“It got to point where I had long hair, they had short or were bald. But they pulled me into their circle. We do other things with massage, pedicures, manicures. Everybody pulls each other in. You become this family. Understanding each other’s struggles.”

Hope brings them together.

“One girl caught her first fish. She was ecstatic. I felt bad because I had long hair and she was bald.” But as it turns out, “That didn’t even matter.”

To learn more about the group and the Opening Weekend reunion (Friday, April 28, through Sunday, April 30): 866-237-5725; reelingandhealingmidwest.org. For more information about the men’s group: 800-699-4490; reelrecovery.org.

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