



CASTING FOR RECOVERY

— *Offering support through fly fishing*

By Peg Miskin

The joy was evident in the huge smiles on their faces. It was a beautiful day, and they were out on the water, learning to fly fish with a group of new friends who, until recently, were strangers. While everyone's story was different, they all shared a common thread: they were breast cancer survivors. And being outside that day, celebrating life, was what it was all about. No one even cared if they caught anything—it was the experience that mattered.

The women were there participating in a Casting for Recovery (CfR) retreat. Founded in 1996, CfR was the brainchild of a

breast cancer reconstructive surgeon and a professional fly fisher. The program's mission is to enhance the quality of life of women with breast cancer through a program that combines breast cancer education and peer support with the therapeutic sport of fly fishing. The retreats offer opportunities for women to find inspiration, discover renewed energy for life, and experience healing connections with other women and nature. CfR retreats are open to women survivors of all ages, in all stages of treatment and recovery, and are free to participants.



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Why Fly Fishing?

On a physical level, the gentle, rhythmic motion of fly casting can be good therapy for the upper body as a way to encourage increased mobility in the arm for women who have had surgery or radiation as part of their breast cancer treatment. On an emotional level, participants are given the opportunity to experience a new activity in a safe environment amongst a supportive group of peers.

New York State Conservationist, April 2015

The retreats provide resources to help address quality of life issues after a breast cancer diagnosis, and a new outlet—fly fishing—as a reprieve from the everyday stresses and challenges of cancer. Participants are in all stages of cancer: newly diagnosed, advanced metastatic disease, several years past diagnosis, and cancer-free. It's this blend of participants that provides the opportunity for women to share their experience on all levels, regardless of where they are in the process. CfR works hard to accommodate women in any stage to ensure their experience is meaningful.

Successful Model

CfR retreats are offered in a unique setting, promoting survivorship and providing the opportunity to improve quality of life. Many women apply, and 14 applicants (plus an additional 20 alternates) are randomly selected to attend each retreat. There is no cost to those attending and all equipment and gear is provided.

The 2½-day retreat begins with a welcome gathering and introductory activities for participants and volunteer staff. The next day, participants are introduced to fly fishing through beginning and advanced casting sessions. Classes are led by trained volunteers and cover entomology, fly fishing equipment and knots. Trained medical and psychological facilitators lead discussions on the medical aspects of breast cancer, and the fears, concerns and overall psychological affects that breast cancer has on the women and their family, friends and co-workers.

On the last day of the retreat, volunteer “river helpers” from surrounding communities arrive to serve as personal guides for some one-on-one, catch-and-release fishing, assisted by CfR retreat fly-fishing instructors. River helpers need to be experienced fly fishers but not professional fly-fishing guides. This day allows the women to test their skills and gain an overall confidence in their abilities.

Casting for Recovery has received endorsements from medical and psychological experts for its innovative and unique healing model. To date, more than 6,800 women have participated in retreats nationwide, and more than 1,600 volunteers coordinate local programs. In 2014, CfR held 41 retreats across 37 states. Interestingly, 70% of the women attending a CfR retreat have not attended support groups, and 95% have never fly fished. Support for the national CfR program comes from firms as diverse as Sage, Sisters on the Fly, Orvis, Ashford

Cody Bell



Lori Romney



Casting for Recovery is more about the comradie and making new friends than it is about the catch. Although catching a fish (like this trout) is very nice.

Hospitality Trust, Cabela’s Outdoor Fund and Genentech, as well as support through individual donations and grants. Locally, volunteers raise funds to support their activities and retreats with help from local organizations, individuals, grants and public events.

One past participant said:

“I am sure you hear it a thousand times, but that was a very special weekend and I believe each person was deeply touched. You and your staff planned and created such a great environment, and the relationship of each person’s individual journey to traversing the river water while fishing was profound.”



Participants celebrating an uplifting retreat on Long Island.

New York Retreats

Since 2000, women from Metro New York City and Long Island have been attending sessions and practicing fly casting at beautiful Caleb Smith State Park and Preserve in Smithtown. With the help of dedicated volunteers, participants ended their retreat fishing in the world-renowned waters of the Connetquot River in Connetquot State Park and Preserve, Oakdale. This Long Island retreat is once again being offered and is scheduled for September 25-27, 2015 in Ronkonkoma. Breast cancer survivors from that area who are interested in applying may do so online at www.castingforrecovery.org. The application deadline is July 17, 2015. For more information on the event, including participating, volunteering or providing other support, you can contact the local Long Island Program Coordinator, Christina Galcia, at cfrlichristina@gmail.com or 631-252-7195.

As National Program Director, I am very proud of CfR's longstanding Long Island program. The majority of women who attend a CfR retreat have never picked up a fly rod and the opportunity to be in the moment that fly fishing provides, is very powerful. Giving these women the chance to think about something other than their breast cancer brings about amazing changes in their feelings about survivorship and quality of life. The volunteers get as much, or more, out of it as do the women attending.

Upstate New Yorkers will also have the chance to partake in a CfR program this year. A new retreat has just been scheduled for the weekend of October 16-18, 2015 at Tailwater Lodge on the Salmon River in Altmar. Women from all of upstate can also apply online. The application deadline is August 7, 2015. As with all CfR retreats, participants are randomly selected, and all gear and equipment is provided. Once

selected, a participant need only get to the retreat site. For more information, contact Program Coordinator Steve Olufsen at cfr.upstateny@gmail.com or 585-415-9970.

"We thank everyone who has helped make this event possible in Upstate New York including our sponsors, generous donors and volunteers," said Program Coordinator Steve Olufsen. "Their dedication to the CfR mission is sure to make the Upstate New York retreat a fun and memorable experience for 14 women who have dealt with breast cancer issues, past and present. Our team is looking forward to providing an enjoyable fly fishing and recovery experience that will help facilitate a weekend of strength and renewal in the womens' lives."

For more information on Casting for Recovery, visit www.castingforrecovery.org.

Peg Miskin is the national program director for Casting for Recovery.