



Casting for Recovery

Casting for Recovery brings breast cancer survivors together to learn a new skill – and learn from each other.

BY BRUCE INGRAM



Newly-minted anglers posing for a picture before going fishing at a Casting for Recovery retreat in North Carolina.

I“It looks like your wife has an aggressive form of breast cancer,” the radiologist told me in September 2008. “We’ll have to run some more tests to be sure. The good news is that this is treatable.”

That the cancer was treatable was indeed “good news,” but Elaine’s diagnosis was still devastating. Our 30-year marriage had always seemed storybook in many ways. We dated for just a short time before we became engaged. We raised two wonderful children and felt fulfilled in our careers as school teachers and freelance writers. The only flaw in my wife’s constitution, I often joked with her, was an indifference to my passion for fishing and hunting. She had no interest in angling beyond occasionally accompanying me in a canoe — and then only to paddle and read while I fished. Although she enthusiastically cooked and ate venison, turkey, and

other wild game, going afield was something she steadfastly refused to do.

Ironically, just days before Elaine’s cancer diagnosis, I had received an assignment from Wildlife in North Carolina to cover the state’s Casting for Recovery (CFR) program — a fly fishing event for breast cancer survivors. When Elaine was diagnosed with breast cancer, she set a goal: To be well enough after chemotherapy and a likely mastectomy to travel with me to North Carolina so we could cover the CFR event together.

She met that goal — and we were introduced to one of the premier outdoor programs in the country.

CASTING FOR RECOVERY

Casting for Recovery (CFR) programs bring breast cancer survivors together for a weekend of fly fishing, counseling, and medical information, with an emphasis on wellness. The brainchild of a breast cancer reconstructive surgeon and a professional fly fisher, the program began in 1996 with four retreats and now operates in 30 states.

When participants arrive, they receive fly fishing gear and an overview of the program. After dinner with the volunteer staff, participants enjoy a motivational group event. The next day includes knot tying instruction and an introduction to casting, plus time to practice these new techniques. The women also join together for sessions on the physical and emotional effects of breast cancer. On the last day, participants finally get their feet wet. Each woman is assigned an experienced fly fishing guide who takes her out for a morning of catch-and-release fishing. After a lunch and a “graduation” ceremony, participants head home with fly fishing gear and a new appreciation for the outdoors.

“The retreat coordinator, staff, river helpers, and every person involved gave all the attendees their full support, attention, and fellowship. We shared, laughed, cried, and caught fish together. I felt so pampered and relaxed – two things I haven’t felt since my diagnosis and treatment. And yes, I have taken up fly fishing!”

– Casting for Recovery participant

“Our hope is to eventually put on events in all 50 states so that every woman who wants to attend can,” says Lori Simon, executive director of Casting for Recovery. And the demand for more programs already exists. Today, Casting for Recovery is forced to turn away three out of four applicants “because of a lack of volunteers and/or funding,” says Simon.

Interested volunteers can join a program already in place or start one of their own. “Applicants looking to start a local or regional program can contact our Vermont office,” explains Simon. “We ask them for a plan and submit it to our board for consideration. If the plan is approved, we will work with them through a planning guide that is replicable from A to Z. We



A Casting for Recovery volunteer (right) gives on-stream instruction to a novice long-rodder (left).

have medical doctors and psychologists on staff who can help with those ends of the process. We show new volunteers how to take women from a place of illness to a place of wellness and at the same time take them out of their daily routine.”

“So many women, after being diagnosed with breast cancer or after going through radiation or chemotherapy, don’t have a lot of hope,” Simon says. “They are afraid of a recurrence and are experiencing a great deal of stress. Some 70 percent of CFR participants had never previously

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been to a cancer support group.” That’s where the mental and physical benefits of fishing enter into the picture.

“Many CFR participants never realized the healing qualities that being out in nature can bring,” says Simon. “So an integral part of our program is teaching participants how to fly fish while at our retreats. The motions of casting a fly also gently stimulate and heal the muscles affected by radiation or surgery” during breast cancer treatment.

A FRESH LOOK AT FISHING

After observing the North Carolina Casting for Recovery program, my wife Elaine resolved to apply to an event herself. Elaine was fortunate enough to be accepted to the May 2010 Mid-Atlantic program in Virginia and came home, well, a changed woman.

“I caught this huge rainbow trout on a fly rod!” she burst out when she came through the front door. “Did you know that trout like to eat caddis flies? Do you know how to read a stream?”

“I had a weekend I will never forget. From the ride up with four other women, chatting all the way, to the fabulous food, lovely gifts at every turn, to the loving warmth and skill of the staff, to the thrill of my catch – it was an exceptional experience, every minute! I wanted to stay a week! Or a month!”

– Casting for Recovery participant

When I briefly interjected that I had written four books on river smallmouth fishing and numerous stories on trout fishing and knew something about the topics, Elaine continued with her stream of consciousness report of her stay.

“Let me show you these flies that I tied at the retreat. These little ones here are for trout; they are mayflies. See how their wings are shaped. These bigger ones are good for trout, too, but I bet you could catch smallmouths on them. Where’s the Cabela’s catalog? I need to order some things. They gave us a lot of gear at the retreat, but I need more. We need to go fly fishing together. How about next week?”

Just what are the trout hitting? A volunteer (right) and Casting for Recovery participant (left) stop to discuss potential patterns.



Elaine and I went on numerous fishing trips together last spring and summer, and her Christmas present (she hinted strongly about what she wanted) was a fly tying kit from Cabela’s. Lori Simon says that such enthusiasm is common among Casting for Recovery attendees.

“Women often develop long-term, positive relationships with fellow participants and with the outdoors,” Simon says. “It’s also not unusual for many of our participants to become avid fly fishers and volunteers. In fact, in many locations there are alumni retreats; six are scheduled in 2011 and we have requests for more.”

THE PERFECT COMBINATION

Elaine believes the combination of outdoor-related activities – knot instruction, fly tying, casting practice, and (finally) fly fishing – with discussions on the physical and emotional aspects of dealing with breast cancer and the goal of overall wellness are just the right mix.

Just as important are the friends that participants can make. At the Mid-Atlantic program in Virginia, Elaine met Maryann Lawler, a cancer survivor from Centreville, Virginia. My wife has already visited Lawler and they hope to go on a trout fishing trip together. Like many CFR participants, Lawler had never been part of a cancer support group or had any interest in fishing.

“It was wonderful to be around people who had survived breast cancer,” says Lawler. “The discussion groups on physical and emotional well-being showed me that there were women in those rooms that had many different kinds of strength and that it was okay for me to move on to recovery and treating myself right.”

“The fishing part taught me that it was important to have ‘me time,’” she adds. “That I can treat myself right by being outdoors, and that I deserve it.”

Carolyn Harvey, program coordinator for the Mid-Atlantic Casting for Recovery program and a breast cancer survivor herself, agrees about the importance of interacting with others who have experienced cancer. “Casting for Recovery has given me the opportunity to meet and stay connected with some remarkable, brave women,”

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Entomology discussions are part of the on-steam instruction at Casting for Recovery events.

she says. “Having never fished in my life, I was willing, though, to try something new and different. At my first retreat in 2003, I received instructions in the basics of fly casting, catch and release, environmental issues, entomology, and knot tying.”

“But that retreat offered so much more than fly fishing,” Harvey recalls. “The psychosocial and educational aspects and the bonding with other women out in a beautiful natural setting proved to be a fantastic experience. In 2005, I volunteered to help staff the Mid-Atlantic retreat as the participant and gift bag coordinator and did so until becoming the program coordinator in 2008. I still serve in that capacity.”

“As an African American,” she adds, “it is doubtful that I would have ever experienced the

GEARING UP

One of the challenges in helping my wife begin fly fishing was finding a balance between inexpensive equipment that might not last long and expensive equipment (think bamboo rods) that might last far longer than her interest.

My solution was a quality, mid-range outfit: A Fenwick® Eagle® 8'6" 5-weight GT Fly Rod paired with a BlackHawk 5/6 reel and a Scientific Anglers' WF-5-F line. With some leaders and flies, the entire outfit should run around \$250.00.

For Christmas, I took Elaine's not-so-veiled hints and ordered her Cabela's Premium Fly Tying Kit with tools, which costs about \$180.00 and is designed for beginners.


You can gear up at

Bass Pro Shops: www.BassPro.com, 800-227-7776

Cabela's: www.cabelas.com, 800-237-4444

Pure Fishing: www.fenwickfishing.com, 800-334-9105

Scientific Anglers: www.scientificanglers.com, 800-430-5000



“Even though I didn’t catch a fish, I want to keep trying ‘til I do. The retreat is not about mastering the casting or the catch – it is about sharing and caring. We found strength and support in each other. I felt accepted and received encouragement from everybody. I love all of you and wish every breast cancer survivor could have the same experience.”

– Casting for Recovery participant

joy of fly fishing. I’m on a mission to get more women of color involved in CFR. It takes you from your everyday concerns and gives you the opportunity to find peace, serenity, and hope for the future. It doesn’t matter where a woman is in her journey with breast cancer, the retreat is available. Some women may only fish this one time, but the opportunity allows for a lifetime of change. To fish is to hope.”

Starr Nolan of Asheville, North Carolina, is a regional program manager for CFR and operates a fly fishing service called Brookside Guides. She shares her most poignant memory from a CFR program. “Cathy’s mother brought her to

the retreat and left in tears because she thought she might not see her again – Cathy had advanced brain metastasis,” recalls Nolan. “Cathy inspired all of us with her enthusiasm and her courage. She knew that she had only a short time left to live and she was determined to live it to the fullest. She enthusiastically practiced fly casting from a wheelchair and fished on Sunday held up by a walker and two volunteers. When she landed her first trout ever, she proclaimed it ‘the best day of the century.’”

“Cathy was the winner of our CFR rod on Sunday. She died about six weeks after the retreat. She asked that the rod be sent around to the other participants, who were instructed to ‘catch a fish with it, then pass it on.’”

Nolan says that she and other volunteers receive as much benefit from CFR retreats as the participants. “Casting for Recovery retreats are magical experiences for the participants and the staff. We all get to experience the amazing feeling of women fully supporting one another with kindness and compassion. We all get to share the laughter and the tears. We cheer together at every success, whether it’s standing in the water for the first time when you’re terrified of water, catching that first trout, or speaking aloud about your breast cancer for the first time.”

Lori Simon explains that it is also common for husbands of CFR attendees to become volunteers. “So many of our male volunteers have told me that they emotionally benefitted from helping out,” emphasizes Simon, “especially men whose wives have undergone cancer treatments.”

SPORTING INDUSTRY ASSISTANCE

Under Armour®, SmartWool®, Trout Unlimited, and Jim Teeny Inc. are just a few of the companies that support Casting for Recovery.

“Under Armour is proud to support Casting for Recovery as they engage breast cancer patients and survivors in fitness and wellness activities,” says Shana Gritsavage, Senior Manager of Events and Corporate Giving for Under Armour. “The beneficiaries of CFR fly fishing retreats are battling this disease in the true spirit of Under Armour’s ‘She’s a Fighter’ campaign. While we continue to fight for a cure for this disease, it’s wonderful to know that Casting for Recovery works to bring comfort and healing through these unique outdoor retreats. Under Armour respects and supports this active approach of taking the fight to the disease.”

Gardner Flanigan, communications manager for SmartWool, says that CFR’s mission meshes well with his company’s desire for everyone to be able to maintain an active lifestyle in the outdoors. “Using the outdoors to rehabilitate and educate is a wonderful concept,” says Flanigan. “CFR has empowered many women, and we view the retreats as a great way to support them.”



Attending the 2009 event in North Carolina provided emotional benefits to me as the husband of a breast cancer survivor. I interviewed Pittsboro, North Carolina, resident Pam Baker, who told me that when she was first diagnosed with breast cancer, she had come upon her husband sobbing alone in the night. Then I interviewed Margaret Williams from Lewisville, North Carolina, who was the volunteer hospitality coordinator for the CFR event and a breast cancer survivor herself. Williams revealed how supportive her husband had been from the time she had been initially diagnosed through her years as a volunteer, and she also talked about how difficult her diagnosis, treatment, and recovery had been on him.

Listening to those two stories caused me to cry for the first time during the year that Elaine and I had been trying to cope with her cancer. Williams reached out to comfort me, and just then I glimpsed Elaine laughing while talking with one of the lady participants — and my

sobbing stopped. My wife was happy and well on the way to recovery.

Casting for Recovery is a superlative event in so many ways. Whether you have a passion for fly fishing or simply want to help women and families recovering from breast cancer, this program is well worth your support.

— Bruce Ingram is a life member of the Izaak Walton League. He has written four books on river smallmouth fishing and writes a weekly blog on the outdoors at www.bruceingramoutdoors.com.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Casting for Recovery

www.castingforrecovery.org, (888) 553-3500

Star Nolan and Brookside Guides

www.brooksideguides.com, (877) 298-2568

