

# Northwest Casting Call

by Michael Hamilton

## No Experience Necessary

It's 6 a.m. on a Saturday in April. In the early morning light, only the robins perched in the budding aspens seem to notice a steady stream of cars arriving on the campus of Northwest Hospital in Seattle.

Engines are turned off, doors open, and a handful of women walk excitedly toward their first fly fishing adventure and an escape from the daily roller coaster of emotions that have plagued them since they were diagnosed with breast cancer many months before.

"It's been the worst year of their life. A year of living hell with constant burn-out," says Dr. Sandra Vermeulen, chief radiation oncologist at Northwest Hospital. Dr. Vermeulen, an avid fly fisher for the past 15 years, has developed Northwest Casting Call: a Fly Fishing Adventure for Life as a remedy to heal body and soul.

"The casting motion is perfect exercise to help prevent lymphedema, a potential side effect that can flare up during or after breast cancer treatment," says Dr. Vermeulen. "All of us who fly fish know the healing powers of being outdoors and the peace a day on the river can bring. It just seemed like a perfect combination."

Now in its third year, Northwest Casting Call, is funded by Northwest Hospital.

The biannual program teaches women, who are selected by their oncologists, fly fishing basics.

"We start out in the classroom and eventually move to the campus lawn for casting lessons," says Jim Gallagher, professional guide and outfitter who coordinates the fly fishing side of things.

"Jim told us to think like a fish," quipped participant Beth Bacon. "I had no idea what fly fishing had to do with

breast cancer." Gallagher and fellow guide Chuck Cooper also bring their drift boats to the campus lawn so the women can stand inside and begin to get the feel of throwing a fly on moving water.

"It's turned more than a few heads at the hospital," says Northwest's Lavonne Williams, one of the program's main developers and supporters. "Watching the

camaraderie develop is really special. Laughing and joking you can tell these women have put their illness on hold and said, "To hell with it. I'm going to have fun."

Flush with excitement and anticipation, fourteen women board the bus in the hospital parking lot and drive out of Seattle, heading east on Interstate-90, over





Snoqualmie Pass, dropping down the east slopes of the Cascades, toward Cle Elum, tucked against the banks of the blue ribbon catch and release Yakima River.

Pulling up to Tight Lines Angling, in Cle Elum, Washington, the women are greeted by a familiar face, owner Jim Gallagher who escorts them into the fly shop to gear up. Imagine more than a dozen women slipping on waders and pulling on boots, looking for the nearest mirror, while a blanket of nervous energy wraps the room around them.

Time to go meet their guides. Oversized vans shuttle the women to three different put ins—designated places to

launch a drift boat into the river—on the upper reaches of the Yakima River. Seven guide boats are already in the water at the three locations. Floating different sections of the river, the women are now divided and will not unite until they meet at the local coffee hangout after their adventure.

“Fish on,” shouts Guide Gallagher. “Strip, strip, he’s coming right at you. Don’t horse him. Let him run. Don’t point at him.” Moments later a beautiful dark spotted 17-inch rainbow is in the net, and the river erupts with shrieks of joy. Across the river, heads turn and shouts of “right on” and “how big” echo from another boat drifting the other shore.

Two miles downstream, near Bristol Flats, Beth Bacon and Mary Porter are together and Mary has already landed two large rainbows. Beth is in the rear seat throwing a big attractor dry. Mary has the bow and is nymphing with a flashback pheasant tail. Throughout the day, there are many chances at hooking eager fish and the women begin to slip into an easy rhythm of casting tight to the bank or behind a rock or at the head of a riffle. Oars dip into the water, the drift boat glides smoothly, the sweet smell of wild yellow irises drifts on the wind, and the river flows through the land of red pine dressed in richly textured bark.





Overhead, a lone raptor circles high above the river, swooping down to crowd the jagged edged basalt cliffs, stained ochre from centuries of decaying lichen, surveying the ripples and pools below. Mary has stopped fishing and sits quietly. She will tell her friends later on the bus ride home that when we go away, even for a day, we find many things, often making a wonderful discovery in these strange surroundings. We discover ourselves.

Back at the Pioneer Coffee Company, the day almost ended, the women crowd around cameras to glimpse a “big one” that would make a husband or loved one back home proud, and pose for photos, hugging each other and laughing with their guides. Beth, Mary and Julaine, bound in unique solidarity with the women around them, are sharing the essence of their experiences.

“I felt triumphant. Like I had climbed a mountain or maybe learned a foreign language.”

“With my cancer I was never able to live just in the moment. Today I was present to everything around me.”

“It’s sisterhood. We cheated death and today we proved it.”

During the journey home, with the glowing light fading away, the women would recall pieces of the day, each completing itself—but all part of the larger picture. To see the vibrant seasonal col-

ors, to hear the water slap against the drift boat, to watch the currents swirl and ebb, to smell the budding flowers along the river bank and to feel the pull of a robust trout—is to be alive. ▸

