

Reel Recovery offers hope through fly fishing

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JOE HANSEN

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For those precious few hours he gets to spend on the river, Kent Anderson, 64, doesn't have cancer. The fear and pain are gone, drowned out by sound of the water, the wind in the trees and the gentle rhythm of his fly fishing line.

Away from the river, Anderson has stage IV prostate cancer, which means his life is dominated by chemotherapy and he's constantly forced to think about how much time he has left. But all that changes when he's on the water.

"When you're out fishing, you're not sick," said Anderson, who lives in Beaverton. "You're so deep in concentration, there's nothing wrong with you. It's a unique experience; there's nothing like it."

Anderson first discovered the therapeutic value of fly fishing when his doctor recommended he take part in Reel Recovery, a non-profit organization that puts together fly fishing retreats for men in all stages of all kinds of cancer. After attending a retreat in Washington State, he decided to devote himself to being a volunteer for Reel Recovery.

That's what brought Anderson, along with nine participants and four other volunteer organizers to the Big K Ranch near Elkton for three days of fishing and relaxation on the Umpqua River last week.

Reel Recovery was founded in 2003 by a group of fly fishermen in Colorado, led by Stewart Brown, who devoted the final months of his life to founding the program before succumbing to brain cancer. Now the national organization puts together fly fishing retreats across the country.

The only requirement for participants is that they be men diagnosed with cancer.

"Men tend not to express their emotions and thoughts. We hope (the retreat) will lead them to hope and better understanding," said Retreat Coordinator Robert Bernard, of Portland. "We want them to be able to focus all the time on themselves and the men they're with. These men are making bonds with each other. They'll carry on lifelong friendships."

And just as Reel Recovery caters to men in all stages of cancer, it also serves all levels of fishermen, from lifelong enthusiasts to beginners, complete with their tangled lines and lost flies.

"I'm just not a fisherman," said participant Robert Dellsite, of Grants Pass. "It's just one of those things you never had time to do. That's the whole point of this; you have time now."

The retreats aren't all fishing, though.

Participants also take part in daily "courageous conversations," in which they're asked

to speak about their experiences with cancer. The questions can be tough, the answers tougher.

But the main point of these conversations is to talk about how being diagnosed with cancer

mal concerns of money and such, then the fly fishing certainly didn't hurt. Even those who are perfectly healthy speak of the restorative nature of fly fishing.

"It's just being in that atmosphere," said



Kent Anderson casts as Robert Bernard wades in the Umpqua River.

has had a positive impact on the men's lives.

To a healthy person, it may not seem possible that a cancer diagnosis could be seen as a positive thing, but each participant on the Elkton retreat talked openly about how getting cancer had improved their lives in some ways. Some said it had brought them closer to their families, others noted they'd learned to better enjoy life.

Just about everybody spoke of new priorities.

"I have an appreciation for life I've never had before. This has taught me how much I



Volunteer Larry White paddles while participant Scott Gross fishes.

care about my family," said participant Howard Passmore, as all the men gathered in a circle for the retreat's closing ceremony. "It's not about money or any of those other material things."

If the retreat was about forgetting the nor-

Dan Taylor, a fishing guide out of Roseburg who was on hand to help out with the retreat. "You're out there with the mountains and the river — it's very relaxing."

That feeling is precisely what brought Anderson back as a volunteer after his experience as a participant with Reel Recovery. And Anderson says the healing isn't superficial — he actually feels better.

Anderson has survived his cancer for four years now, and he attributes much of his recently renewed health and vigor to fishing and volunteering for Reel Recovery.

"I owe my whole outlook of my new life to Reel Recovery," said Anderson. "You determine what's really important, and it's not the material things — it's the friends and family. You view everything differently when you're life is threatened with cancer, and you definitely appreciate nature more in this time of your life."

And, Anderson adds, Reel Recovery has given him hope, a rare commodity in the world of stage IV cancer.

"Anybody with cancer wonders how much time they have left. Through these courageous conversations, though, I've found out about men who have my exact same cancer, who are on my exact same treatment, who are going on living for eight or nine years," said Anderson. "In eight or nine years, there might be a cure."

