

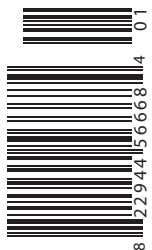
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Reel Recovery

Casting against Cancer



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Reel Recovery

A Fishing Buddy Casts against Cancer

BY MIKE MCKENNA

PHOTOS BY MARC WALTERS PHOTOGRAPHY

Cancer is a scary word. Whenever it's uttered, most of us naturally recoil, if only subtly.

"When people hear you have cancer, they get scared, especially at first. They act like it's contagious," Jeff Entringer said last summer, as we bounced in my old pick-up down the dusty roads of Idaho's spectacular Copper Basin, in the Salmon-Challis National Forest.

"The funny thing is," Jeff said, with an easy smile, especially for a guy battling prostate cancer, "there's nothing to be afraid of. Being afraid is the last thing you need to be around someone with cancer. What you really need to be is a friend."

Those words were a reassuring and solid reminder for me, while I spent my first weekend volunteering as a "fishing buddy" for the Idaho chapter of Reel Recovery, a national program founded in Colorado in 2003. For three years now, thanks to the tireless work of

Dr. Dick Wilson, Idaho has been hosting an annual fly-fishing retreat, free for men throughout the Gem State who are coping with any form of cancer. Each weekend-long retreat run by the grassroots nonprofit organization hosts about fourteen participants and at least that many volunteer fishing buddies, inspired by the simple motto, "Be Well! Fish On!" In between angling sessions, a handful of Reel Recovery staffers lead the participants in "Courageous Conversations." And courage is something you

learn a lot about when you go angling with cancer patients.

It was early last August, when the days are long and warm, the nights are delightfully chilly and the sage and rabbitbrush surrounding the Wild Horse Creek Ranch, fifteen miles west of Mackay and just over Trail Creek Summit from Sun Valley, are as thick as horse thieves. As the sun slowly took the chill off that Saturday morning in the Idaho outback, the other fishing buddies and I on the lush green lawn of the ranch waited—with palpable nervousness—for our partners to emerge from their morning meeting. My fellow fishing buddies were primarily regular ol’ middle-aged guys like me. Most of them were from Boise, and all had fished some pretty impressive waters in their lives.

As the participants emerged from the ranch, I realized for the first time in my life that I was afraid of the “c-word,”

too. It certainly wasn’t the best realization to be having just a few minutes before I was about to spend a couple days with cancer patients—each man in the midst of a life-and-death battle against some form of the disease. Heck, I wasn’t even exactly sure how I’d gotten myself into this fix in the first place.

All I really did was ask the good Dr. Wilson, a Boise-based neurologist, if I could meet a former participant for a short article about the program for *Sun Valley Magazine*. When I showed up to meet Kenny Connolly, who at the time was a twenty-seven-year-old Challis resident battling esophageal cancer, I was greeted by a group of more than a dozen Reel Recovery fishing buddies, participants and their spouses, most of whom had driven more than two hours to meet at America’s original ski resort.

After a long, impassioned talk in the lounge of the Sun Valley Inn, we all



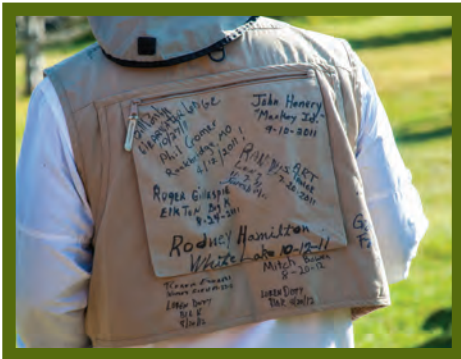
OPPOSITE: Dave Faulk of Meridian shows how it’s done.

FAR ABOVE: Mike McKenna (right) gives a few tips.

ABOVE: Fred Baker (left) with Larry Donohoo, both of Eagle.

LEFT: Lining up the gear.

COPPER BASIN



headed for burgers and then to the Hulen Meadows section of the Big Wood River to fish. After watching the group and photographing them for a while, Kenny told me he hadn't actually landed a fish during his retreat that summer—or ever when using a fly rod, for that matter. So I rigged up my trusty nine-foot, five-weight fly rod. Off the business end of a hopper-dropper, I hung a zebra midge I'd tied (just the type the trout on the Wood go crazy for) and handed it over to Kenny. And just like that, luck—or maybe something stronger—was on our side. He had a fish on.

Before that afternoon was over, Dick asked if I'd be a fishing buddy at one of that summer's retreats. Next thing I knew, I was standing there star-

ing at the Copper Basin as it lit up like gold in the late morning sun, wondering if anybody would notice if I sneaked back to my truck and peeled out of there like my pants were on fire. Trying to keep my cool, I reminded myself that we were only going fishing, for crying out loud. Cancer isn't like cooties. It's not contagious, and it's not imaginary. These were real men—courageous men—willing to angle away a couple precious days with a strangers who love to fly fish and are willing to lend a helping hand or, hopefully, a helpful net.

I looked over at Bob Starck, who wore a calm but powerful smile. Bob had been one of the folks who showed up in Sun Valley that day. Drove all the way over from Rigby just to help

out for an afternoon and to share his story. Bob wasn't just a regular fishing buddy, he was also a former participant. A couple years earlier, he'd been diagnosed with cancer of his head and neck. Participating in a Reel Recovery retreat helped him beat it. "That's kind of what kept me going. Thinking of being on the water," Bob said that day. He's now recovered and works as a fishing guide on the legendary waters of eastern Idaho.

Seeing him standing there, quiet but still visibly excited about the day ahead, gave me a shot of something much stronger than my morning coffee.

As horses whinnied from the stables and a warm breeze rustled the teepees perched about the ranch, it dawned on

ABOVE LEFT TOP: Tom Rogers (right) of Boise watches the results of his instruction.

ABOVE LEFT BELOW and ABOVE: Participants at the Reel Recovery trip to Copper Basin last summer sign each other's fishing vests.

me that any cure for cancer must include a big dose of hope. And since hope is also a key ingredient when you're fly fishing, I figured I could at least try to provide some.

After we all introduced ourselves and were given a quick casting clinic, the fishing buddies were paired off with participants. They paired me with a fellow writer, a poet, no less. Jeff Entringer is in his mid-fifties, a career military man, with gentle eyes and the crisp, clean look of an Army veteran. That spring, he'd had surgery to remove prostate cancer and was on his way to a full recovery.

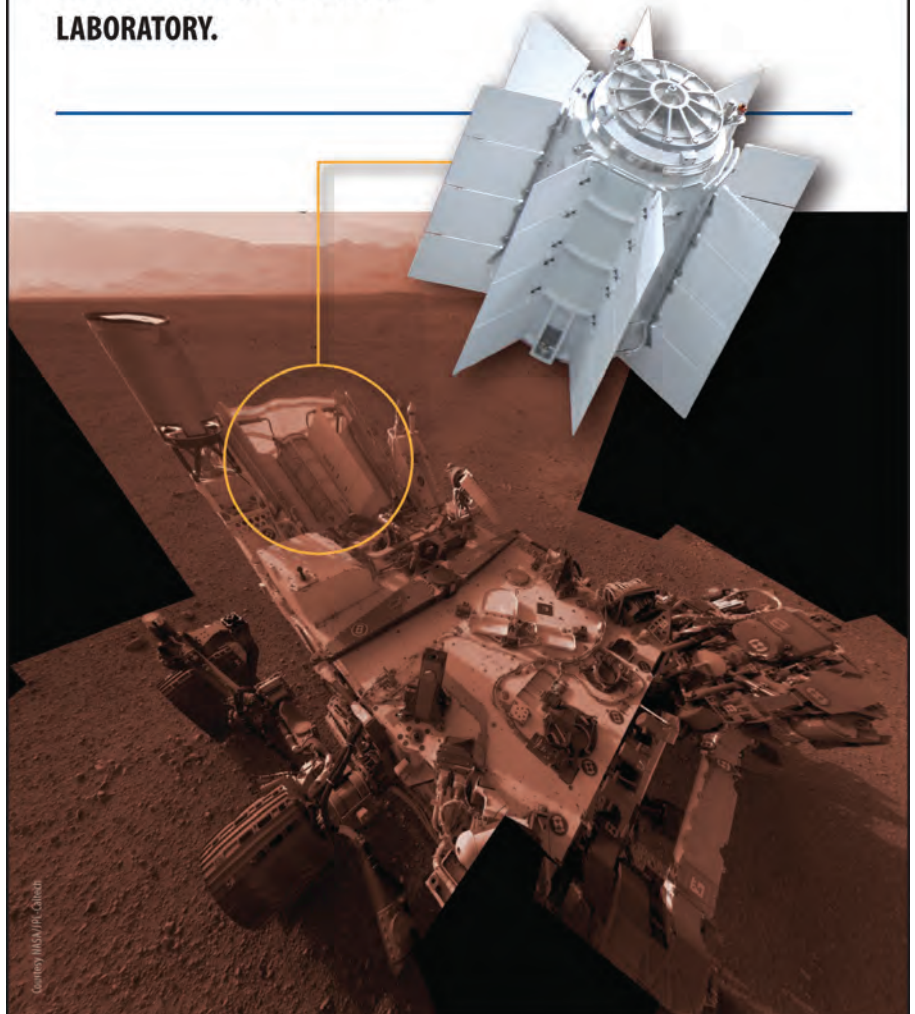
He looked as fit as a fiddle and would later say he was "lucky" that they'd caught it early. Jeff had been an avid angler his whole life, but had only fly fished once, decades ago. He was a bit nervous as we prepared to make a few practice casts on the lawn. To help assuage his fears, I tied on a good-sized Humpy and then immediately got my first back cast stuck in a tree. "Well there's your first lesson ... actually, the first two lessons. Everybody gets snagged occasionally. And always look behind you before you start casting," I said, thinking to myself, Wow, fly fish guiding is easier than I thought.

Jeff whipped out a couple solid casts and then we loaded up and went off in search of trout. We made our way over to a nice bend of Wild Horse Creek, a skinny high-mountain stream known for its healthy fish population. Despite his lack of experience with a fly rod, Jeff was quickly casting well and managed to coax a sturdy mountain whitefish to bite, and then a rainbow trout.

With the "stink off," as they say in fishing circles—and the buzz of catching fish on a fly rod had obviously fired up

Energizing the Red Planet Rover

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Jeff—we headed back to the ranch for lunch, chatting all the while like a couple of old buddies about angling and Army life, about his original windswept homelands of North Dakota, about writing and family.

We spent much of the heat of the afternoon exploring stretches of the North Fork of the Big Lost River. The fishing was slow. The views and conversation were full. Jeff is the proud father of three adult children and grandfather to a handful more, and counting. He's happily

married to an outdoorsy woman. It's his second wife, and he remains friends with his first. Jeff has a peaceful energy about him that was certainly there before he was diagnosed with cancer—and certainly helps him battle it.

If I didn't know, I never would have guessed he had cancer. But that wasn't the case with all the participants. Just before dusk began to settle in, we hit Wild Horse Creek again and Jeff landed a healthy brookie. Not a bad day by anyone's standards.

After dinner that night, some of us fishing buddies and a few of the participants shot the breeze under a sky so full of stars it seemed like you could reach out and grab them. We talked about how this is what it's really about: being outdoors, getting fresh air, admiring great views, enjoying the camaraderie of like-minded men. It reminded me of something Kenny Connolly had said that day we met in Sun Valley. He'd said one of the best parts of being at a Reel Recovery retreat is it reminds you of how fun and

ABOVE: From left, Ru Yokoyama, Mike Okamura and Reese Ferguson head to water.

OPPOSITE: Andrew Tian of Ketchum wets a line.

healing it is to just be one of the guys again—instead of being a guy with cancer.

After a chilly night, the sun awoke me from slumbering in the back of my truck. The smell of fresh coffee wafted through the ranch. After breakfast, it was back to the water.

Jeff completed his Grand Slam by catching a gorgeous cutthroat. It was the first time he'd landed Idaho's state fish and I don't know what glowed more brightly, the crimson slash under the trout's jaw or Jeff with joy. Before long, the afternoon arrived and it was time to head back to the ranch. As we slowly made our way across the glory of the Big Lost drainage, Jeff reflected on the weekend. "The best part of this is



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that I've just been a guy out fishing today. I haven't thought about cancer at all. Not even for a second," he said with a big grin. "And that's a nice thought."

A little late returning, we made it back just in time for the retreat's ending ceremony. The participants huddled into a tight circle, with each fishing buddy standing behind his participant, a supportive arm placed on his buddy's shoulder. The participants then took turns sharing what they got out of the weekend. It was powerful and emotional stuff. And as I listened to each grown man

share his feelings—something inherently difficult for most men, healthy or not—it became obvious that the weekend really wasn't about fishing. It was about healing. It was about courage and hope. It was about brave men battling cancer and bonding as brothers.

And all I really did was be a good fishing buddy. I helped try to fool a few fish in the midst of one of the most glorious mountain valleys on God's green earth. I shot the breeze about water and trout, roll casts and wind knots, parenthood and poetry. So that maybe, just for a

little while, scary words like cancer and chemotherapy, hospitals and tests could be forgotten and replaced with happy, healing words like "Fish on!"

As Jeff eloquently wrote in his poem, "That Moment in Time," which is now shared at other Reel Recovery retreats:

In our brief existence that is called life

It is not what happened yesterday that is important,

And we must remember that tomorrow may never come.

Today is the only day in which we can make a difference. ■

ABOVE: Clockwise from upper left: participants bond; Carl Madison of Boise shares an emotional moment with friends; Brian Hall of Twin Falls on the move.