

Sentara Martha Jefferson

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magazine

Healing On the *Fly*

Hope and
Support for
Cancer
Survivors

PLUS: Home Health Care and the Rewards of Connecting with Patients
Breathing Easier with Help from the Health and Wellness Center

Healing On the Fly

Celebrating 15 years of hope and support for cancer survivors at the Spring Fly Fling

Misti O’Neal was coming off an exceptionally tough year when she found herself, fly rod in hand, pursuing trout in Moormans River. During that year, she had faced a breast cancer diagnosis, a lumpectomy and radiation treatments, as well as the unexpected loss of her sister.

“I was feeling overwhelmed,” O’Neal says, recalling that she initially resisted the invitation to join the Spring Fly Fling, an annual weekend retreat to help support women cancer survivors. She wavered on going all the way up until the day of the event, but ultimately decided to attend.

“It ended up being exactly what I needed,” she says.

In many ways, O’Neal’s experience embodies the power of the Spring Fly Fling, which celebrated its 15th anniversary in March 2023. The “Bug Slinger Warrior Sisterhood™,” as the retreat-goers call themselves, now numbers more than 150 women, many of whom return to the retreat annually as alumni, inspired to give back and help others on their cancer journeys.

“It’s a really powerful experience,” says Susan Kreiner, who attended the 2018 Spring Fly Fling. At the time, she was undergoing a series of reconstructive



Misti O’Neal discovered a passion for fly-fishing at this year’s retreat.



Retreat attendee Martha Robeson learns fly fishing from Mark Andrews, Spring Fly Fling leader and co-founder.



Princess Perry learns fly-tying from the experts at the Thomas Jefferson Trout Unlimited Chapter.

surgeries following breast cancer diagnosis and treatment. Now she volunteers for The Women’s Committee of the Martha Jefferson Hospital Foundation, which provides leadership support for the retreat. “We were all so different—but when you stripped it down, we were going through the same thing. Someone would tell a story, and I’d break down while they were talking because I would think, ‘I totally understand that.’”

To facilitate connections among participants, the retreat is purposefully short on medical experiences and long on unstructured time to relax. “The women have spent so much time dealing with doctors and appointments,” says Mark Andrews, founder and executive director of Therapeutic Adventures Inc., a nonprofit organization that provides adaptive outdoor experiences. “We wanted to give them some time away from all that, where they could

“Witnessing the strength of these women and listening to their stories made me feel hopeful and made me want to do more for others.”

—Misti O’Neal, 2023 retreat participant



focus on learning something new and having fun.” Andrews and his wife, Teresa, along with James “Chubby” Damron, president of the Thomas Jefferson Chapter of Trout Unlimited (TJTU), are the architects of the retreat.

This year, the retreat kicked off with a St. Patrick’s Day party on Friday night, complete with silly headbands and party hats. On Saturday, the women paired up with expert fly-fishing guides from TJTU to learn about fishing

and fly tying. They shared a special potluck lunch with retreat alumni, and later the participants enjoyed an evening of music and gourmet food prepared by Teresa Andrews and the couple’s son, Zach, the executive chef at the Spoon & Spindle in Orange, Va. All participants received roses and gift bags. They then spent Sunday fishing or relaxing before heading home.

Andrews and Damron lead a community of volunteers who are inspired to provide a therapeutic, five-star fly-fishing retreat for the women, free of charge. Therapeutic Adventures, TJTU, Sentara Martha Jefferson Hospital and The Women’s Committee provide funding and volunteer support. Crozet’s Montfair Resort Farm rents space for the event at a deep discount, Shenandoah Joe Coffee Roasters supplies coffee, and a local vintner provides fine wine from his private cellar.

For this year's retreat, 33 volunteers, many with clinical and adaptive guiding expertise, donated a combined 377 hours of service. "They do so much to make the women feel special," says Andrews. "Their love is a big part of what makes the retreat so healing."

On Saturday night, Neli Ramirez was among the volunteers serving an exquisite meal of salmon, pork tenderloin, broccolini and a Norwegian chocolate cake she provided. Sunday she led a yoga class. It had been 10 years since Ramirez attended the retreat, but she still remembers how the camaraderie helped her regain her confidence after her breast cancer treatment.

"I had lost my ability to have fun," she says, recalling how emotionally fraught the simple act of removing her hat felt at the start of her retreat. "But when you are in such a relaxed, supportive and accepting environment—with music, good food, a cozy fireplace and even some silliness—you can't help but experience joy."

That was certainly the case for O'Neal, whose initial shyness at this year's retreat quickly gave way to enthusiasm. "I caught the fly-fishing bug," she laughs. "On the first day I caught the most fish, and on the last day I caught the biggest fish. I even went out one morning when it was only 29 degrees. I could have stayed there all day."

Of course, not all participants discover a passion for angling, which is why the menu of activities also includes nature walks, kayaking, yoga and massage. Opportunities to rest, read and cultivate new friendships are also encouraged.



Past retreat participant Neli Ramirez (front) now gives back as a yoga instructor.

"The retreat has become something really magical," says Andrews. "The women often start off reserved, but by the second day they're walking hand in hand to the lodge, laughing and supporting one another."

That type of camaraderie has kept volunteers like Donna Westermann coming back for more than a decade. A passionate fly angler, adaptive guide and oncology nurse practitioner, Westermann has known for years about the therapeutic benefits of casting a fly rod, spending time outdoors and learning new skills. When she underwent her own breast cancer journey several years ago, however, those benefits got more personal. Donna kept coming to the retreat, choosing to stay on as a guide rather than as a participant. Giving back in that way felt healing.

Kreiner, too, understands the retreat's transformative power. "When you go through something like this and your body is torn apart, you're not the same person you were—it makes you humble. Attending the retreat opened my heart."

Images courtesy of retreat alumna and longtime volunteer retreat photographer Theresa White.



A St. Patrick's Day party on Friday night set the tone for this year's retreat.

To join The Women's Committee in supporting the Spring Fly Fling and other women's health programs in our community, contact TWCchair@gmail.com, call 434-654-8258 or visit mjhfoundation.org.