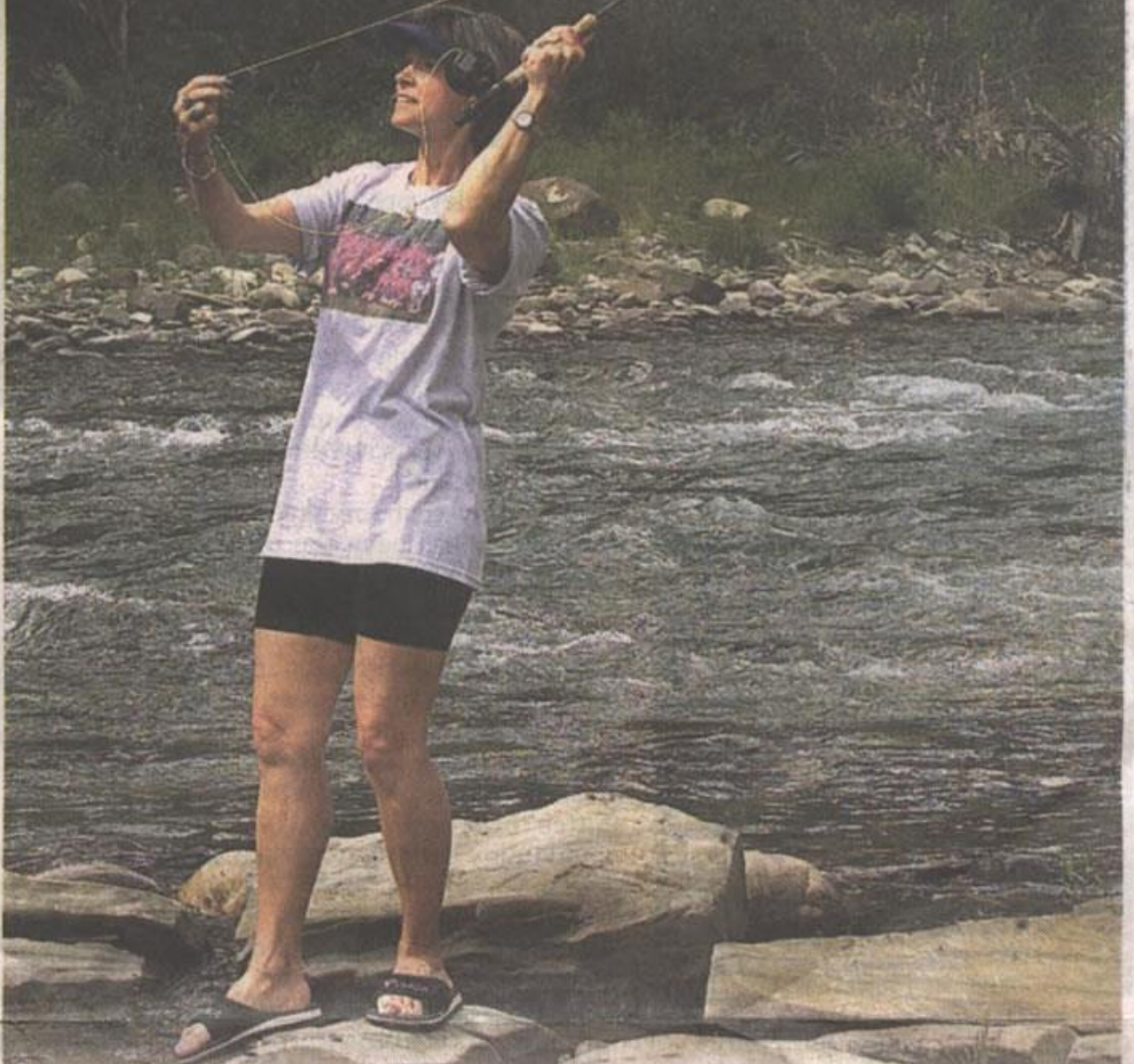


Cancer survivors cast away cares



Photos, Jenelle Schneider, Calgary Herald

Allie Fate, a participant in the Casting For Life program at the Centre for Learning, concentrates as she makes her very first cast, into Ghost River on Saturday morning.

remain forever vulnerable.

So they laugh? They come together for a frolicking weekend of fly-fishing?

What gives here?

"There is a point in time when the fear leaves, when you accept there is a future ahead of you, no matter how it doesn't look like that," says Pat Partridge, a massage therapist who eschewed chemotherapy. "For me, I savour the flavour and taste of life more now."

Sitting across a table from her, surveying the wondrous scenery from a deck at the Ghost River Crossing Centre

for Living west of Cochrane, Donna Szentmiklossy picks up the thought: "Once you are faced with death, you look at life with more passion, the things you do, you do with more passion, just like this."

This is a weekend called Casting for Life, co-ordinated by fly-fishing enthusiast Lynn Ronaldson and instructed by expert Lynda McLennan.

"A lot of these ladies will go home and they will never fly-fish again, and that's fine, but we had two ladies last year who went out and bought full gear

after the weekend," says Ronaldson. "All of the volunteer instructors here, even though we haven't had it, we have been touched by breast cancer in some way. My aunt ignored it for the first little while before she finally had to deal with it, and it made her a really angry person. We know what's involved in the treatment, we know what they go through, but still I'm sure we don't have even a fraction of an inkling of what is going on in their lives."

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FROM DI CANCER

The Canadian outflow from a U.S.-originated organization called Casting for Recovery, the idea is to introduce breast cancer patients to an activity that will gently stretch soft tissue in the shoulder and chest areas, get the body fluids moving, enhance the healing.

"A gentler sport, calming, soothing, and that's what we need," says Allie Fate, a secretary.

The weekend's second and arguably more enduring benefit is the opportunity to indulge in mutual support amidst a gorgeous, natural setting.

"I feel I'm cured. I've had the treatment," says Fate. "But I don't think you can ever say you are back to normal, back to the way you were before. You were more carefree before. Now you kind of just enjoy being here in the morning, and you want to be alive by doing things. This is being able to come to a once-in-a-lifetime retreat with a bunch of women, and learn how to do something at the same time."

All three Calgary women also engage in dragon boat racing through the year.

The cancer metastasized in Szentmiklossy, to the point that her femur "crumbled" during a race in Toronto. She had it replaced, and continues with the sport. In 1998, doctors gave her 18 months to live.

On Friday, they gathered with 13 other women to learn casting tech-

niques, watch a fishing video and take in a special fashion show. Saturday, they learned to tie flies and knots in the morning, and in the afternoon were to head down to the river to fish a dry fly, nymph and steamer.

The word nymph triggered some black humour, and thus some of the laughter in Friday's introductory session.

A uniquely female disease, breast cancer is especially insidious. One of every 100 cases is male, and then, it is simply not the same. The disease does not root in genes. The attack launches from who knows where.

"Or why," says Fate, who endured chemotherapy.

Where the entire breast was once removed to prevent the spread of cancer, by performing a lumpectomy today a surgeon can restrict the invasion to the specific area surrounding the tumour. Cosmetic treatment has also improved dramatically.

Yet some victims react by crawling inside themselves in post-surgical depression, to become isolated "and go off and die in a corner somewhere," says Szentmiklossy.

Social stigma may come attached to any form of cancer, and women feel it compounded by breast cancer. Fate notes how friends and co-workers in well-meaning fashion ask carefully how she is doing, as though they are afraid to hear the answer.

On this fly-fishing weekend, the delicacy of conversation is blissfully removed. The emphasis is on disdaining the disease, in favour of flicking a fly off water and breaking into hysteria perhaps when the lure instead lands in a branch.

"One of the most helpful things is to know you are not alone," says Partridge, afflicted eight years ago. "A trust factor gets lost when you are diagnosed. . . . Do you tell someone you have cancer? Do you tell someone you are going to die, or not die? By speaking out, hopefully I let people know it's OK to share that, and to keep living with whatever I'm living with."

The women huddled on the lawns and riverbank this weekend, some gingerly flicking the rod with a wrist action, others more daringly working their arms rhythmically, perhaps wondering like a baseball pitcher coming off rotator cuff surgery whether their bodies were up to the test. They are united by a devastating experience, by the painful process of recovery, by the search for inner peace and a newfound attitude to life.

"Catching the fish is secondary," Szentmiklossy says. "We don't really want to catch fish."

"Some do," says Partridge, recalling the childhood days of dangling a worm from a bamboo pole.

"I'm not using a hook," Szentmiklossy retorts.

"It looks so graceful," Fate says. "You've got this swan-type motion happening, and you're one with nature. It's just being outside, doing something instead of sitting on the couch."

Not long into her first practice session, Partridge had the line snaking softly through the air.

"Look at that," the instructor praised.

"Woo-hoo," several women cheered. Like they do when they're having fun.