

NEWS

Healing Waters Fly Fishing helps vets' physical, emotional rehab

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MARTINEZ — Phil Holmes' attention is focused on Steve Witherby tying a fishing lure — attaching the hook to a vice and wrapping the strand of chenille around it, forming the body of the fly. He then adds a tuft of peacock feather.

"This fly is money," says Witherby, who has tied flies since boyhood. "Fish can see this from 20-feet away."

The Dublin resident is volunteering his time and expertise to a group of disabled veterans with injuries ranging from hearing loss to traumatic brain injury. "It becomes intuitive once you start to do it," Witherby says.

Holmes, a Benicia resident who served as a medic in the Vietnam War, has been attending weekly meetings at the VA Medical Center in Martinez for the past couple of months as part of Project Healing Waters Fly Fishing.

A healthy camaraderie arises with sharing stories of war experiences and favorite fishing spots.

"We've all had a bad sergeant to talk about," says Albert Iamele, of Concord. "It's a way to clear their head."

"It's about the contemplative aspects of it; a chance to divorce oneself from the problems of life," he adds.

"And when it comes to nightmares in your sleep, that's not a minor problem."



For Holmes, who struggles with post-traumatic stress disorder, learning the art of fly tying has boosted his concentration, has helped regain his confidence, and he has benefited from the social interaction with other vets.

"I was getting more depressed and started to isolate ... It's time to take care of myself ... I'm in this for the long run," says the retired meat cutter.

"This also gets me out in nature. You forget about a lot of other things. It's a chance to just enjoy life."

Outside on a recent warm Thursday afternoon, Orinda resident

Bill Gallogly instructs another veteran about the finer points of casting with a nimble fly rod.

"The rod is stored energy," he says, noting the position of the rod. "A quality cast is based on the quality of your stop."

"It's about time and finesse, rather than power," adds David Lipscomb, who was instrumental in bringing the fly fishing experience to inpatients and outpatients of the local VA center — also coordinating its fly fishing excursions.

"This is not a lost art; it's a burgeoning art and it's very therapeutic," says the Lafayette resident. "It's a complicated, fine motor activity that treats the mind and body."

The veterans' program is sponsored by the local chapter of the nationwide Project Healing Waters Fly Fishing, in conjunction with Diablo Valley Fly Fishermen, of which Gallogly and Lipscomb are members.

The Healing Waters program was started in 2005 by former Navy Capt. Edwin Nicholson at Walter Reed National Medical Center, who saw the imperative of having a healing diversion for wounded veterans, and made the connection with the meditative, rhythmic practice of fly fishing.

Afghanistan veteran Shawn Coe, 26, discovered the local "like-minded" group as an inpatient at the veterans' center in Martinez and found the requisite focus for fly tying and rod building to be "calming and awesome all tied together."

"It helps with my depression in a really big way. It really takes you out of the stress ... You get lost in your world, wrapped up in what you're doing," says the Pleasanton resident, who credits this experience with setting him on an educational trajectory with aspirations of working with fisheries and wildlife.



That loose corollary between tying flies and successfully formulating goals is consistent with psychologist Michael Sapiro's assertions, based on his work with neurocognitive rehabilitation and teaching meditation to returning combat veterans with PTSD or traumatic brain injuries.

"When you're concentrating on the arc of the rod, tying the fly, you can also do that with other facets of your life.

"It's about calming down the nervous system. When there's a connection to purpose, there's a sense of ease," says Sapiro, who last summer earned his doctorate in clinical psychology from JFK University in Pleasant Hill.

"For the soul that's been frightened out of its body, something like tying flies can be very soothing.

"This is a chance to be still and not be re-triggered," he adds. "You can retrain your brain."

Meditative practices, such as fly fishing, that bring a veteran to greater mindfulness can help turn the tide in a human psyche that's become oriented toward reacting to traumatic events — even in instances whereby PTSD has for the sake of survival "severed that mind-body connection," says Doreen Maller, chair of the Department of Holistic Health and Psychology at JFK.

Maller cites findings that traditional therapies and interventions do not suffice on their own when it comes to treating returning veterans with PTSD — and offers the effectiveness of methods once considered as ancillary or adjunct, as truly complementary.

"With fly fishing, there's a tactile approach that translates into a softening.

"It's about calming the heart. It helps people find their center when their center is lost," she explains.

Once "the body can find that place of calmness," Maller maintains, it can return to it at another time.

healing waters

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