

Casting out

Project Healing Waters uses fishing to bring sense of belonging to veterans



LUKAS EGGEN/Itemizer-Observer

Alan Fitzpatrick prepares his fly fishing rod on Saturday morning. Fitzpatrick was one of six veterans to attend the rod building workshop in Independence.

By Lukas Eggen
The Itemizer-Observer

INDEPENDENCE — The saying goes if you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime.

Could fishing mean even more? Project Healing Waters Fly Fishing believes that, for veterans, the answer is yes. And the local chapter hopes to teach veterans throughout Polk County — whether an expert or a novice — to use fishing as a way to help veterans find a sense of belonging.

Alan Fitzpatrick, of Salem, knows firsthand how powerful of an impact Project Healing Waters can have.

After suffering a knee injury while serving in Afghanistan, Fitzpatrick returned to Tacoma, Wash., in 2014, where he served in the Warrior Transition Battalion as he recovered from knee surgery.

His physical recovery was the easy part. Fitting in proved to be the most difficult challenge.

“We don’t have a real sense of belonging or need (when we return),” Fitzpatrick said.

That September, he stumbled upon a group tying flies. He stopped to investigate and was introduced to Project Healing Waters.

He attended almost every Tuesday meeting from then on until he returned to Salem in March of 2015, where he immediately reached out to the Salem chapter.

Healing Waters Fly Fishing

• Healing Waters Fly Fishing is a national organization, originally founded in 2005, whose mission is “dedicated to the physical and emotional rehabilitation of disabled active military service personnel and disabled veterans through fly fishing and associated activities, including education and outings.” The Salem program meets the second Tuesday of every month at the Salem Vet Center from 4 to 6:30 p.m. More experienced tiers meet the last Tuesday of the month at the Salem VFW at 4 p.m. All veterans are invited. There is no cost to attend. All costs for supplies, excursions and equipment will be covered.

• For more information: Frank Flux, 1finespringer@gmail.com.



Fitzpatrick was always more of a gearhead than a fisherman, but before long, that didn’t matter.

“This becomes a regular thing. It’s a night I can spend time with these guys and talk fishing instead of politics and other kinds of garbage that we can talk about,” he said.

Fitzpatrick was one of six veterans to attend a fly fishing rod building workshop on Saturday and Sunday. The workshop, held at Polk County Fire Station No. 1 in Independence, is one of numerous activities the group plans throughout the year.

“The biggest ‘ah ha’ moment for me is when I’m on the river and fish it,” Fitzpatrick said. “I can feel the spine that they’re talking about. I can feel the difference between my back cast and forecast. I

like those kinds of nuances.”

The room was all smiles — this was a place where veterans could come together, something that can be rare once a veteran returns home.

“It’s nice to be around folks who understand,” Fitzpatrick said. “The person who returns to an active military institution, he’s still around the guys he deployed with. You form a bond you won’t have with anyone else as much as you try. But what about the retiree or the reservist or someone who returns to Independence? ... Oregon doesn’t have a single federal active military facility. I mean, where are my peers? To be able to get together with guys and tie and have some outings with people who get your issues, it normalizes you a little bit. These folks maybe didn’t deploy with you or to the same country or region, but they deployed.”

It’s clear that those who attended believe Project Healing Waters does amazing work.

But getting the word out to more veterans has been a struggle, at least at the local level.

Founded in 2005, Project Healing Waters has expanded nationwide over the last decade. The program offers a variety of activities from tying flies to fishing excursions all at no cost to the veterans.

“There’s solitude and tranquility out there,” Daniel Lowe said. “Lots of times, you’re out on a stream and guess what, there’s no phone reception. You get away from every day boredom. We get guys in the group who are 100 percent disabled. They have nothing better to do with their time except think about what’s wrong with them. Once they’re out there, time flies and doing something like this takes their minds off that stuff.”

The Salem program meets the second Tuesday of every month at the Salem Vet Center from 4 to 6:30 p.m. with more experienced fishermen meeting the last Tuesday of the month at the Salem VFW at 4 p.m. Meetings are open to any veteran.

Now, they’re hoping to increase their net, finding more veterans who may be looking for support — something that isn’t easy for veterans, Fitzpatrick said.

“We’re trying to find the veteran who doesn’t naturally do this,” he said. “The veteran who needs a place to belong. The veteran who doesn’t have waders or a tent and to be able to outfit that guy and teach him to fish, rather than give him a fish. There are a few avid fishermen and a lot of people who like to hang out and fish. We have guys who will put a rod in your hand and go fishing. Even if we don’t catch a thing, we can hang out on the river and have a good time.”

That, ultimately, is Project Healing Water’s true goal — to give veterans a chance to be themselves among people who understand.

“Men can fish their entire life and it’s not the fish they’re after,” Lowe said. “It’s where they’re going.”



LUKAS EGGEN/Itemizer-Observer

William Lowe inspects part of his fly fishing rod on Saturday. Project Healing Waters helped provide rod kits for veterans to construct their own fly fishing rods.



LUKAS EGGEN/Itemizer-Observer

Daniel Lowe works on preparing part of his fly fishing rod for the next step.

2016-2017 SCHOOL YEAR

Open Enrollment for all grades start May 1st!

Luckiamute Valley Charter Schools Kindergarten Round-up April 14th 5:30 - 7:00 p.m.

Please Bring: Birth Certificate Immunization Records

17475 Bridgeport Rd., Dallas, OR 503-623-4837

FREE BUSING

K - 8TH GRADE SMALL CLASS SIZE

MINET MODERN FAMILY PACKAGE:

Now providing streaming video!

503-837-0700

TV Everywhere
75 Mbps
90 TV Channels

www.minetfiber.com