

Casting coach John Boyles oversees participant Vivian Leahy's efforts.



# Casting for Recovery

Niki Morrell sees the benefits of fly fishing.

To fish is to hope... Any fly fisher can relate to this but when you know it's the motto of breast cancer charity Casting for Recovery and you're standing in a room full of women about to have their first casting lesson, it takes on an added poignancy.

There's nothing particularly poignant about the dining room scene I walk into at Owen River Lodge on this crisp Anzac Saturday morning, however. I'd previously visited Felix Borenstein's five-star fishing lodge in the off-season and it was a beautifully tranquil place.

Not now.

The noise level is astounding: women talking and laughing, the clatter of crockery and the occasional input of Felix himself. It's the third year he's hosted Casting for Recovery's annual South Island retreat and after a massive summer season he still seems to have plenty of energy.

"One of my very dear neighbours had breast cancer and subsequently passed away," he explains when I ask how he got involved. "Just after she died, Casting for Recovery was brought to New Zealand from the US.

"The first [South Island] retreat was held in Nelson and they put all these lovely women in something akin to a

boy scout camp. I didn't think that was right, so I rang Casting for Recovery and volunteered the lodge."

The connection with someone who's had breast cancer runs through every conversation I'll have with the volunteer support crew this weekend; a testament to how many lives the illness has touched.

Sandra Jermyn, one of the event's coordinators, is no angler but she nominated her fly fishing sister for a CFR retreat in the North Island in 2011 and raised funds to get her there.

She went on to set up the South Island chapter, a decision that changed her life.

"It's huge. You're thinking about it the whole year. And whenever you hear of someone who's had breast cancer, the light goes on [and you think] – Right, you need to apply."

The ten participants and the CFR support crew file out of the dining room and down to the river, where they'll watch a casting demonstration. Then they'll have a crack at it themselves on the lawn.

"These women have been through incredibly stressful times and often after they have therapy and surgery, they go straight back into their normal lives," says retreat facilitator, Kate Miller. "So this is an opportunity for them to come away, to have some time for themselves, free of responsibility."

Pairing breast cancer recovery with fly fishing might seem an unlikely combination but it was a logical match for American breast cancer constructive surgeon and keen fly fisher, Dr Benita Walton. She founded CFR in 1996 in Vermont after noticing that the physical action of casting helped reduce scar tissue adhesion following mastectomies. She also believed spending time in nature had its own healing power.

Ten years later, Sherrie Feickert, a former Air New Zealand flight attendant, established the charitable trust in New Zealand because she wanted to give something back to her community.

There is no cost to retreat participants other than their travel expenses. Fly fishing is the weekend's main attraction but the Saturday afternoon pamper sessions are also hotly anticipated. These include massages, manicures, advice on lingerie and prosthetics and a session of highly contagious 'laughing yoga'.

Many of the women have never before experienced five-star accommodation, cuisine and indulgence. Farmer's wife Ange lives near the coastal town of Kaikoura where there's no breast cancer support service at all. She approaches us beaming, having just had the first massage of her life.

"Now I know what all the fuss is about," she says. "I want one every day."

At eight o'clock the following morning, it's overcast and drizzly, with a Severe Weather Warning in place for heavy rain in the afternoon.

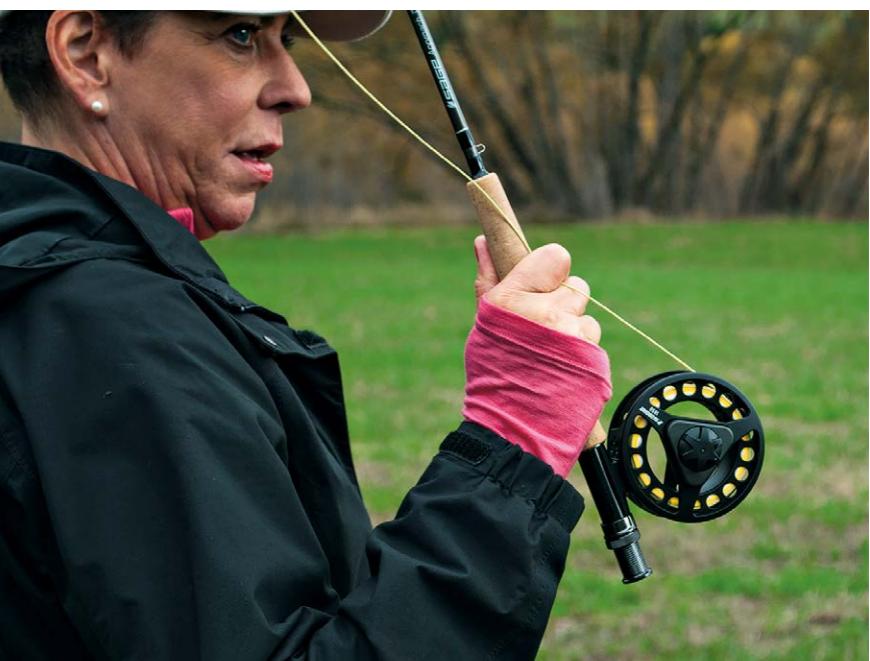
The fishing guides start arriving as the women are finishing breakfast.



CFR participants and guides.



Waders and balloons at Owen River Lodge.

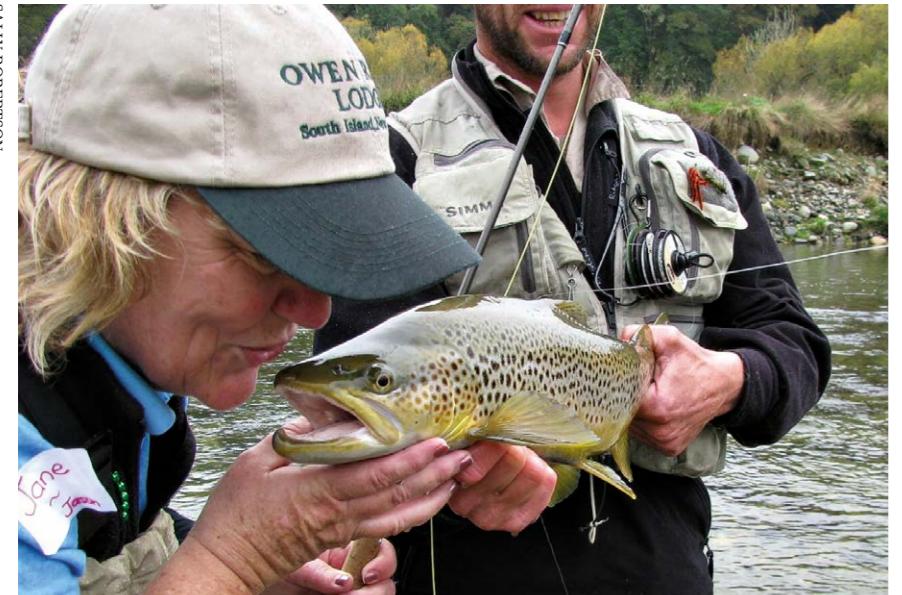


Participant Christine Gabrielle is a study in concentration.

IT'S A WONDERFUL EXPERIENCE,  
SEEING THESE LADIES LEARNING SOMETHING NEW.  
THEY'RE THE HEROES OF THIS.

Peter Carty and Paula Miles fish the Mangles River near Murchison.

## Casting for Recovery... continued



Jane Newman kisses her beautiful trout.

There are 10 of them, one for each participant. The pairings are carefully matched by the CFR medical and support team. All the guides are volunteers and they're coordinated by Peter Carty, a local fly tying legend and CFR's national fly fishing consultant. He's been involved in the New Zealand retreats since they began.

"It's a wonderful experience, seeing these ladies learning something new. They're the heroes of this."

After a comprehensive briefing, the guides and women are paired up. Then they scatter to nearby rivers and streams, where they'll spend the next three hours. I accompany Peter Carty. He's guiding for Paula, who's

recently concluded her chemotherapy treatments.

The pair stand in the water, close to the bank. Peter takes Paula's elbow to steady her as they progress upstream. It's moving to witness the care he takes, treating her as if she's made of spun glass.

After an hour or so, Paula makes a perfect cast. She's so thrilled by this that she doesn't notice a trout has taken her nymph. When she does, it's too late but she isn't worried. For her, it was all about making that flawless cast.

One of the other women does land a 4 pound brown. She kisses her fish, kisses her guide and lets the trout go.

All CFR events are strictly catch-and-release.

On their return to the lodge, the women are wildly enthusiastic about their experiences. One of them bounces into the dining room, confidently announcing she's buying "a four-piece, 5-weight Sage fly rod." The guides are as pumped as their partners, swapping stories and comparing notes.

"They love it," Sandra Jermyn tells me. "They don't really care that you can't fish; it's just the excitement of promoting their sport because they want more women involved. Anything to get more people fly fishing!"

Every woman I speak with says she wants to fish again, so the guides have obviously done their job well.

To fish is to hope... but this life-affirming event shows that fly fishing can open the doors to a great deal more. With new friendships forged, a luxurious break away, a skill learned and a great excuse to take time out in future, it's clear that for these ten women, the Casting for Recovery 2015 South Island retreat has been an unqualified success, on every level. **FI**



Jane gives her guide a big kiss too.

NUNN MORLEY

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