



Women celebrate life together at an Infinite Boundaries retreat.



## Natural Healing

Women who have experienced breast cancer are finding strength in nature and each other.

by Julie Eppers Salvin

**W**ho would have thought that three and a half days in the woods could make such a profound difference to someone who has lived with breast cancer for 10 years? Yet retreats specifically for those who have had breast cancer are providing women with an opportunity to celebrate life.

“By the end of the weekend I felt as exhilarated as if I had just climbed Mt. Everest,” says Sue, a participant in an Infinite Boundaries retreat. “I thought the retreat was going to be nice—a getaway for me. But in no way did I expect it to be the dramatic, life-changing experience that it was.”

Developed by the Breast Cancer Recovery Foundation (BCRF) in Madison, Infinite Boundaries retreats provide

a unique opportunity for women to come together and explore the challenges they face every day. The nonprofit organization was founded in 1997 by Ann Haney, herself a breast cancer survivor. But Haney had the idea for the foundation before she was ever diagnosed. While working as a state health officer, she saw a need not being met and thought of the idea while visiting her cabin on Lake Superior. Being surrounded by nature, she thought, would be wonderful for women dealing with the issues unique to breast cancer.

She was right.

The retreats are available to women in all stage of recovery. Sue Abitz, executive vice president of BCRF, says that bringing women together who range from just-diagnosed to cancer-free has been extremely beneficial.

“We will have women in bandages who are still receiv-

ing treatment alongside those who are 10 to 15 years out in their recovery," she says. "Being with women who have survived for so many years sends a powerful message to someone just starting treatment." And those who are farther along in their recovery also benefit from an opportunity to share their experiences and deal with issues they may not have addressed.

Phyllis, a cancer survivor, says, "I came to the retreat because I realized there were some parts of my emotional recovery that were just plain stuck."

She found the retreats cleansing as well as enriching and said it helped her to "focus on what I could add to my life instead of what had been taken away."

There are three key elements to each retreat — group discussions, adventure and creative arts. Each element adds something powerful to the experience. The discussions, led by cancer survivors, center on subjects all of the women can relate to.

One topic discussed is living with the fear of recurrence, which can be a paralyzing fear for a cancer survivor. "Almost every cancer survivor experiences the fear of recurrence," says Abitz. "By talking with other women who share a common bond, many learn to live their lives with absolute joy. They learn to not wait until tomorrow, but to live life now."

In addition, the women discuss the importance of restoring sensuality and sexuality in their lives. When a woman goes through chemotherapy, she is immediately kicked into menopause, which produces myriad physical and emotional issues. Women who have experienced breast cancer often need to find a way to reclaim their sexual selves.

And, difficult feelings in general are also delved into. At the retreat, participants talk candidly about their feelings — from anger to guilt to fear — and often find others who feel the same way. One woman who attended a recent retreat says the



**Have paddle, will travel. These Infinite Boundaries retreat participants get ready to embrace the adventurous aspect of the experience.**

retreats do more than help you through your current misery; they help you learn there are other ways to cope. In addition, "they help put cancer in its place," she says.

The adventure component is powerful as well. "Following cancer, women often feel betrayed by their bodies," explains Abitz. "The adventure activities are designed to help them reconnect with their physical selves and restore a positive body image."

Adventure activities include biking, nature hikes and kayaking. "The kayaking is an exceptionally great experience," Abitz says. "In kayaking, the woman rides very low on the water and in a sense becomes part of the water. It can be a very sensual experience."

The third component, creative arts, helps women to express themselves through a wide variety of artistic projects, including painting face masks, making prayer flags, beading and stamping.

"Something magical happens when a group of women sit around a table making jewelry," says Abitz.

Every aspect of the retreat is well-planned, including the location. The retreats are held several times a year at various sites in Wisconsin and Minnesota. In addition, one is held in Dickinson, Texas. A common theme at all of the retreat locations is their natural beauty. "There is healing in nature," says Abitz. The retreats are

also held near water to allow for important aspect of the experience, the "letting go" ceremony.

This ceremony takes place out on the water at sunset on the last evening of the retreat. Each woman is asked to bring one item from nature that signifies what she wants to leave behind. She may then share her thoughts with the group, or simply "let go." For many, the act of throwing the item into the water is not only moving, it is transforming.

Many women who attend Infinite Boundaries take lasting friendships

with them when they leave. Women will often get together throughout the year and keep in touch via e-mail. Because the retreats are in such high demand, most women attend just once, although some do return as volunteers. And, BCRF also holds alumni retreats.

One particularly fascinating aspect of the retreat is just how long-lasting the benefits are. The University of Wisconsin School of Medicine department of psychiatry is conducting ongoing research on the retreats. Women electing to participate in the research complete a survey before attending the event. The survey includes several key indicators of self-perception, wellness and well-being and utilizes a control group to measure outcome. After the retreat, the women complete additional surveys at three-, six-, nine- and 12-month intervals.

The results have been astounding. Research shows that women attending the retreat experience a significant decline in anxiety and depression, improved body image, and a significant increase in positive effect, including the ability to feel joy. And, the results last. One year after a retreat, participants are still responding positively.



*For more information on the Infinite Boundaries retreats, call 608-821-1140 or visit them on the Web at [www.bcrf.org](http://www.bcrf.org).*