

desgrosseilliers-todd-2019-07-26.mp4

Todd Desgrosseilliers [00:00:10] So I grew up in Maine. And that was something we did as a family thing. Generally, when you turned about 10 years old, you learned to fly fish. A lot of places in Maine's fly fishing only, so if you want to go fishing there, you have to learn to fly fish. So I started started fly fishing as a kid, something I did with my grandparents and my family. And as I got into the military and got busy and travelled around, it kind of lost touch with it. I was wounded in Iraq, and my doctor recommended it as physical therapy. So I got back into it again. And it's been it's been really helpful with my with my recovery from my injuries.

Todd Desgrosseilliers [00:00:54] I enlisted in the United States Marine Corps in 1985, spent five years enlisted Marine in the infantry and was selected for an officer commissioned program, and I served the balance of my 31 year career as an officer. I was, I was wounded during the Second Battle of Fallujah. Traumatic Brain Injury from that, and developed some complications over the next several years. Got some physical therapy and eventually ended up retiring in 2016 because of those injuries. As a Colonel. Served all over the world, spent- it was a fabulous career. And while I was going through my physical therapy, my doctor recommended the Project Healing Waters fly fishing program that met near the clinic. And that's how I got connected to Project Healing Waters. As a participant and then a volunteer. And just as my med board ended, the CEO job position opened up. So I applied for it, and they hired me, and I've been the CEO of the organization for the past three years.

Todd Desgrosseilliers [00:01:59] So our mission is to provide physical and emotional rehabilitation for active duty military if they're referred by a doctor, as I was, or any disabled veteran from any conflict. So our program serves disabled veterans and injured active, active duty military. We use fly-fishing as the mechanism to help them heal, whether that's physical or emotional. Our programs have five core program activities; fly tying, fly rod-building, casting, fly-fishing education, and outings. Nine out of ten of our participants that show up have never fly-fished a day in their life, never would've considered it. And there is real science behind the therapy of the activities in fly fishing, that help with some of the more common injuries, invisible injuries of this war in particular, but also Vietnam veterans, of post, of Traumatic Brain Injury and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. So we've found that that our approach to a regular program, which meets, a program that meets on a regular basis, that conducts those five core program activities in balance, actually provides a community where our participants can heal through friendships, camaraderie, the bonding and all the other social activity that goes along with fly-fishing, tends to kind of help move people through their injuries. We have all sorts of adaptive equipment that we've either developed, or have, have gotten from the fly-fishing industry to use, to get anybody out on the water and get them on a fish, and get them excited about fly-fishing. The physical side of healing, sometimes is a little bit more obvious. Than the emotional side, six emotions, sadness, surprise, anger, fear and disgust, or five of those. And those are typically negative type of emotions. And we focus on the sixth one, which is joy. And we try to make joy bigger, and use that, that, the emotion of joy as a healing tool. And our volunteers are fabulous at being committed to the cause, to being committed to helping our participants in anyway they can, to kind of move through and have some post-traumatic growth from their injuries and kind of try to, try to get them, get them healed and back into society.

Todd Desgrosseilliers [00:04:32] So I, like I said earlier, I learned to fish, fly-fish as a kid, in Maine. Little different in different parts of the country, obviously like Fly-

James Thull [00:04:42] Native Brookies out there, or?

Todd Desgrosseilliers [00:04:44] Yeah, native Brookies, Landlocked Salmon, mostly streamer fishing. and the Brook Trout were the big target, most of the time, for us. And it was kind of like hunting fish, right? And so it was a lot of fun, something I did with my grandparents. So I had a lot of really, really good memories about, about, about fly fishing. And we fished, fished all over Maine. And, you know, as a kid. Getting back into it as an adult, I mean, who knew you could use a great sport like fly fishing as a, as a real form of therapy to help some of our nation's veterans that are struggling? And for me in particular, I've got some pretty bad vertigo. So, the, the main, the main reason my doctor recommended the program for me, is because of the, of the different types of activity that involve either tying flies or building fly rods or castings. Those mindful type of activities help the, the, your brain kind of rebuild some damaged pathways. And it could, over time, although it does take a long time for this process to happen, over time, can provide a pathway for healing and improve my balance, improve my ability to concentrate, help control the, I have PTSD that's caused by chronic pain. So try to kind of get that subsect nervous system under control. If you're focused on tying a fly, then everything else kind of fades away, and your brain calms down. If you're out casting, casting is one of the things that I primarily use because I was trying to focus on balance. Your body gets to adjust itself, to keep itself in balance because, you know, I really wanted to cast that fly out there to try to catch that fish. So there was a different type of commitment than sitting in a clinic and kind of working, you know, in a sterile environment and getting on the outdoors. There's a, there's a certain type of therapy that's holistic about just being out in a beautiful scenery and then in a stream and the camaraderie, and the social activity that goes along with fly fishing. There's a lot of healing in that as well. And you build friendships. And I tell people that, you know, friendship is a gift of love, and love is what heals, heals people. And I think a lot of, a lot of what our participants get out of the program is that, you know, you can, you can learn to, learn to live with your your injuries, your disabilities, if you want to call them that. But it shouldn't stop you from having some joy in life and having a sport like fly, like fly tying, like fly, like fly fishing available to people is amazing because there are so many different aspects to it that you can completely immerse yourself, and really never learn everything about it. I've been fishing since I was a kid, and every time I go and do something, I learn something new. This week, out here with Fly Fishers International, we have a strategic partnership with Fly Fishers International, their clubs partner with us to form our programs. So we get the fly fishing expertise from the Fly Fishers International clubs. And just being out here at this, at the expo. And participating in the clinics that they built for us, to teach our volunteers how to teach casting, I learned so much about casting, and I've been casting my whole life. Who knew there was so much to that? Right. So I think it's, it's a powerful healing, tool, because it gets your brain engaged and you're learning new things. And when you start to learn new things, you know, you start to feel better. And I think the healing power of the sport is really powerful because there's so many different aspects of it that people can get interested in. And then, you know, that that kind of kicks that other stuff off your mind, for a while. And that's, it's really helpful. It's been helpful for me, in particular. Helped me transition. And then just, you know, providentially as my medical board ended, this job opened up, and they hired me, and I'm glad they did. It's one of the best things that's happened to me, for sure. And I travel around the country talking to people about our programs and, and how things are going. And every single place I go, there's five words I hear. Is, "This program saved my life." So, I mean, if you can hear that one time, everything we do would be worth it, but we hear it a lot. And to me that's that's what it's all worth. You know, is to have a great sport like fly

fishing, keeping people from committing suicide. That's a pretty powerful message. And that's, that's pretty gratifying.

Todd Desgrosseilliers [00:09:51] We are a national organization. We don't have international programs, although we do, we do, we are building a program in Germany, but it's on the U.S. military base in Germany. So they would, you know, fish in Germany, if they went on an outing. But the program is for U.S. military personnel, active duty or veterans that are injured. But over there, they could recruit German citizens to help them and all that sort of thing. We're in the process of building that program right now. But we have 219 programs across the country. Primarily a volunteer organization. We have over 4000 volunteers nationwide, over 8300 participants in those programs. We have a small headquarters staff of 14 people, not counting me. We, we do, we keep our expenses small. So that we can maximize the value of our donors. Out to the, to the participant, which is really the reason that we're here. We're here to help that veteran, that military man or woman, who's struggling with something to, to heal. And we have a partnership with the Veterans Administration. 216 of our programs meet at V.A. facilities, whether that's a veterans medical, V.A. medical center, community based outpatient clinic, or a vet center. We have a very strong partnership with the V.A. and we, we augment what they're doing with, with recreational therapy. And ours is outdoor recreational therapy, which I think is even better. Because we get them out, get people out, get them socializing with people, you know, with each other and reconnecting with nature and teaching them a sport that is a lifelong sport. You can teach your kids, you can share it with your family. And it's, you know, it's a lot of fun.

Todd Desgrosseilliers [00:11:49] For me, aside from the healing aspect I get out of it, I always loved to fish. I love being outside. I spent my whole career in the infantry, which is an outdoor job in the military. I love the outdoors. I just. The solitude, the connection with nature. With fly fishing, it's a contest between you and the fish and the stream. And whoever wins the stream to their advantage, typically wins that, that contest. So that's the sporting aspect of it, I think. There's a conservation aspect. Every single fly fishing person, every fly angler, by definition, is a conservationist. So it keeps you aware of, of conservation and the importance of, of kind of leaving no trace behind you, when you leave the stream. We catch and release the fish. So there, I mean, there's, there's a lot about fishing that, that I love to do. It's exercise that I can still do with my injuries. And so it's one of the few things that I can still, still do. In spite of my injuries, that I've always loved to do. I have great memories as a kid, fishing with my family, with my great-grandfather, who was a WWI veteran, with my grandfather, who was a WWII veteran. And, you know, we'd go fishing and you know, what was said on the boat, stayed on the boat. There were a lot of lessons I learned from them, you know, and how to be, how to be a man of character and integrity. And a lot of those lessons were straight out of fishing. So, I mean, there's a, there's a lot of really good, healthy and fun memories I have about fishing as a kid, as a young adult. You know, we played baseball and went fishing in the summer, and that was pretty much it. So it's, it's something I do with my own kids. And, you know, we have good memories ourselves about fly fishing. And you don't have to catch any fish, really. It's just, just spending time together, doing something that's fun. And, you know, if you, if you caught a fish, every time it'd be called, would be called catchin'. It's a challenge behind it. I mean, there's a lot to learn, to try to outsmart a fish that's, by definition, nowhere as near as intelligent as a human. They operate a hundred percent off of instinct, and we don't. So how do you how do you beat that? In a way, that's to me, that's, that's a that's a challenge. If I see a fish, I want to, I want to try to get that fish to take that fly. And it's not really a bug. And if they figure that out, then you've failed. And if they don't figure that out, then then you've succeeded. And there's a lot of learning that goes behind even

making that happen. It's a skill sport. So there's a lot of different types of skills that you can learn. We've been focusing on casting this week, but there's fly tying. We have rod building activity. So we actually teach a participant how to tie their own fly, how to build their own fly rod. We teach them how to cast it, and then we take them out and they catch a fish on a fly they tie themselves, on a rod they built themselves. And to me, I mean, that has a lot of meaning. That's very enabling. And to be with one of our participants when that happens, I mean, you can see the sort of change, like we just did our casting competition here. And when the participants step into the casting box, you can see a sort of confidence that kind of grows up in them, that, that maybe wasn't there before. So, I mean, that's just one aspect of the sport. So, I mean, it, it really means a lot to me that you can, you can, you can take that sport and, and do, do that with it. And it's amazing.

James Thull [00:15:53] Yeah, that is.

Todd Desgrosseilliers [00:15:53] And it's our volunteers that really make that happen. I mean, we have the best volunteers. And many of the volunteers will, will advocate to me that they probably get more out of it. And then the participants, too, which is really a good thing. I mean, you have the right people when they feel like they're, they're kind of getting something back out of that too, serving these people that have served the country. So, 20% of our volunteers start off as participants. I think that's a that's a good sign, that what we're doing is, is really healing people. They feel like they need to give back in a way, they become volunteers. Like I said, I started off as a participant, became a volunteer, and now I'm the CEO. There's a couple other folks on our staff that did the same thing, started off as a participant, and they want to come work for us. So that's fly fishing. And that's what it means to me. You know, it's a, it's a great healing tool. And I love it even more now, because we've been able to do that with it, and as a, as a, as an officer that led people in combat I feel like I have a moral obligation of leadership, to help all of those people that have, have been put in situations that caused them any type of trauma, and to help them move through it. And that's what we're doing. You know, one person at a time.

Todd Desgrosseilliers [00:17:14] Well, if we don't take care of our resources, it is most definitely not going to be here. And I think, you know, one of the things that, that we can do is just, just keep bringing the younger generation into the sport and showing them, you know, what a clean stream looks like. And, you know, what types of bugs are in streams that are healthy, and what types of bugs are not. I mean, you kind of learn that by learning the sport. But I mean, the, the environment is going to, the environmental change is going to affect the things in the environment, including us. And if we, if we don't preserve and conserve our fisheries, whether they're cool water, warm water or saltwater, they're not going to be there for the future and the fish aren't going to be there. And we're going to lose, you know, an amazing resource, but also a wonderful sport that's been around since, since the Greeks, right? The first fly that was tied was the stone fly.

James Thull [00:18:12] Macedonia.

Todd Desgrosseilliers [00:18:13] Yeah. And they, and they, they they were fly, fly anglers as well. So it would be unfortunate to lose, you know, a couple, four thousand years worth of history, because we can't take care of what god has given us. So, you know, this is this area here around Bozeman is a perfect example of just a beautiful, peaceful place, full of great streams that are, that are bounding with fish. And if we don't take care of them, they won't be there anymore. So we do have to, we do have to be conservation minded. And we do, we do teach that as part of our program. To, to have some ethics and to be mindful

of where you are, not only the people that are fishing, but the, to kind of leave no trace behind you when you leave a place, and, and respect it a,s as a, as a treasure that it is.

Todd Desgrosseilliers [00:19:14] Fishing story? Well, I never was really a big saltwater angler. Like I said, I grew up in Maine. It's a cold water fishery up there. And we basically fish for for trout and Landlocked Salmon. But I had an opportunity to go fishing for False Albacore off the shore of North Carolina, last year. And catching one of those is like hooking into a little torpedo. So, that was a lot of fun. Different type of, of, of fly fishing. And so I think, you know, my story about that would be to try to kind of diversify the places that you fish because it is different, you know? And you learn different skills. And, and the saltwater fish are different than than a freshwater fish, and a warm water fish is different than a cold water fish. So, I've spent a lot of, a lot of time fishing. I remember fishing one day with my grandfather, and the legal limit for Landlocked Salmon at the time in Maine was something like 16 inches. So I didn't really want to spend the whole day fishing, I wanted to go play baseball with my buddies and stuff. But I told him I'd go fishing with them, so we did. And I hooked into a fish. We measured it was 14 inches long. And he said, "Go ahead and squeeze that fish." So I did. And he said, "How long is it now?" And we measured it, and it was 16, 16 inches. But when I looked back at him, I said, "it's 14 inches." And we put the fish back in the water. So I think that's the lesson he was trying to teach me about integrity, which is something I always remembered that, you know, there's, there's a lot of that you can teach to your own kids. And that's probably, I guess my favorite fishing story, is him kind of giving me a test, to see if I was going to pass it or not. And of course, I knew exactly what it was after I thought about it for a minute. You know, the fish was long as it was the first time we measured it. And he went, back in the water for someone else to catch, when he grew a little bit more. But that's how you conserve the, the fishery as well. You obey the laws, you follow the rules. Because they're there to kind of keep it for, for future generations.

Todd Desgrosseilliers [00:21:48] What... I think the future involves us bringing the youth into the sport. And it's a sport that's, that's open. Anybody can learn to fly fish. It's not, there's no restrictions by race or gender or any of that sort of stuff. So, you know, I would just get, get young people involved, you know. Put down your phones, and get away from the TV, and put away the video games, and go buy a fly rod and, you know, join a fishing club, or learn to, learn to fly fish. Get outside and get some fresh air and enjoy the environment. You'll get some exercise in the process. You'll learn a lot. And I think, you know, as, as a fly angler, I probably learn a lot more about myself, than anything else, when I'm out there. And it's a, it's just really a great sport. And if we're going to have it in the future, we've got to continue to grow people that will have a love for it. And, you know, my love for fly fishing is the good memories I have as a kid, but also that we're able to use it as a, as a mechanism to heal our nation's veterans, who are struggling in many ways. And, you know, we don't, we don't talk about injuries. We talk about tying a wooly bugger, we talk about building a five weight fly rod, or we talk about how to tie knots, or what kind of bugs are, you know, the entomology of the stream, and all that sort of stuff is different. But it's all about learning, you know? And as long as you're a human learning organization, you're going to, you're gonna be fine. And so just be, be excited about it, 'cause it's a great sport.