

“The river has changed my life, just like the cancer has.”

Roe Konopa, angler and cancer patient



Roe Konopa casts her fly into the Au Sable River east of Grayling during a session of Reeling and Healing of Michigan.

Chronicle photos • Ken Stevens

‘Queen of the Fly’

'Queen of the Fly'

Time spent fishing is therapy for woman battling cancer

By Susan Harrison Wolffis
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

A river runs through Roe Konopa's life.

She has stepped into its waters, waist-high in fly fisherman's waders, and she has been changed.

She has gone after the beautiful but wily brown trout in the Au Sable, Little Manistee and Pere Marquette rivers, the undisputed "Queen of the Fly" of a fishing camp of women. One step into a river, and the waters are never the same, even though she religiously returns the fish to their natural habitat in the catch-and-release program she follows.

And she always, always thanks the river for all that it gives her, even if that day's yield is nothing more than time away from the chemotherapy treatments and doctors' appointments that dictate her schedule and energy level.

"It doesn't get any better than this," she says, no matter what.

A river runs through Roe Konopa's life, but naturally, its course has changed since she first picked up a fly rod.

The waters have not stood still over the years.

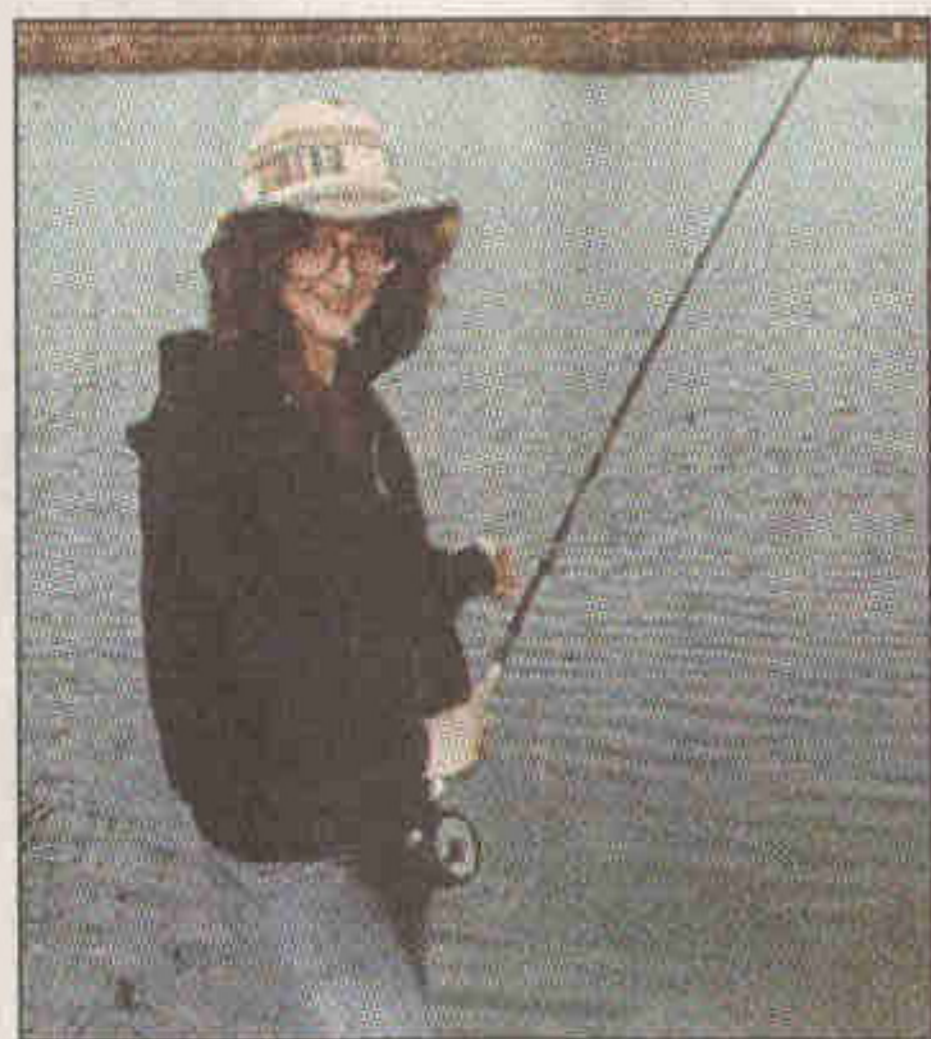
At times, they have even raged.

Nine years ago, Konopa was diagnosed with an aggressive

breast cancer that invaded her body and her plans for the future. She was 43, married to a man she adores, in love with his children and grandchildren, working in a landscaping business she'd started because office work was



Konopa, who has always loved fishing, was diagnosed nine years ago with an aggressive form of breast cancer. She's shown above (today) and right in a photograph from 1977.



After taking a dose of morphine, Konopa rests on a bench along the river with the company of volunteer fly fishing instructor Cathy Seroczynski.

Fly fishing therapy

■ **What:** Reeling and Healing of Michigan is a series of fly-fishing retreats for breast cancer survivors and those currently in treatment.

■ **Participate:** To sign up for one of the two 2004 retreats at Gate's Au Sable

Lodge in Grayling, call Debra Johnston-Visch at (616) 457-1185 or write to her at 1692 Southlawn, Jenison, MI 49428.

■ **Cost:** There is a \$50 registration fee and room for 12-14 students per retreat.

■ **The organization:** Reeling and Healing is a non-profit organization funded by donations and a series of fund-raising projects.

■ **On the Web:** www.ReelingandHealing.org

simply too confining for a woman who yearned to be outdoors.

Within weeks of the doctor's news, she underwent surgery and rounds of chemotherapy treatments, and she searched out ways to heal and find peace.

She went to the river and stood at its edge.

Then she waded in.

Konopa has always fished, as a child growing up in Manistee with her father and brothers, as an adult living in Twin Lake with her husband, Rich Ashley.

Please see REELING, HEALING 2F ►

► REELING, HEALING from 1F

But this time, she went in the company of other women.

In 1997, as she entered the first years as a survivor, Konopa heard about a fly fishing retreat specifically for women with breast cancer.

First called Casting for Recovery, and later re-named Reeling and Healing of Michigan, the retreat offered more than spiritual, emotional and recreational healing.

Fly fishing also is good physical therapy for women who have had mastectomies and lumpectomies, helping them regain the strength in their arms, shoulders and hands, helping reduce the swelling that comes because the lymphatic system is so often affected.

It takes strength to stand in the Au Sable's currents.

It also takes courage.

"The river has changed my life," Konopa says, "just like the cancer has."

The cancer that keeps returning.

After four and a half years, doctors found a malignant bone mass. Then another. This past year, doctors discovered a mass in her liver.

Since then, she has endured chemotherapy every three weeks, a regimen of pain medications and steroids, waning strength and energy.

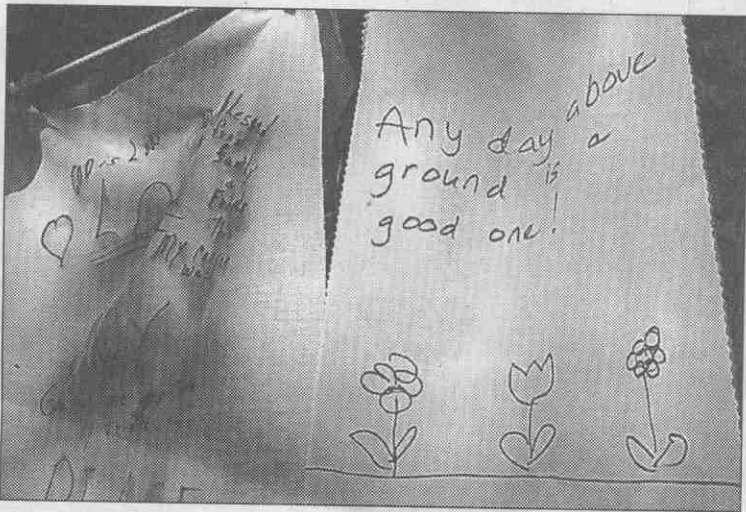
"I've had to give up so many things," she says. "There have been so many changes."

But the river runs deep in her soul, just as deeply as the Reeling and Healing retreats she's come to call a "passion," and so she saves what energy she has this time of year for the river.

"It's so hard to explain what brings me here," she says, struggling at first to find the words that define so much of her life.

She is sitting on a bench on the edge of the river at Gate's Au Sable Lodge in Grayling as she talks, on retreat at one of three Reeling and Healing sessions held this year. She is still emerging from "a chemotherapy fog," determined to join the 12 students and equal number of fly fishing instructors, nurses and others on staff on the Au Sable.

"It's just something that



grabs you and doesn't release you," she says. "It keeps you. It claims you."



At that first retreat in 1997, Konopa was the only one who caught a fish, as they say in fly-fishing jargon, "on the fly," meaning she didn't use a worm. She didn't use a minnow. She used a woolly bugger.

The rest of the women crowned her "Queen of the Fly."

It is a title that's stuck, out of respect.

She also is the only one who has been at every retreat,

except for Debra Johnston-Visch, the volunteer coordinator of Reeling and Healing. So many women sign up for the fishing weekends, Johnston-Visch can no longer take repeat applicants.

Except for the Queen of the Fly.

She is no longer a student. She is the welcoming committee. She takes care of the prayer flags the women make, hanging them so they catch the wind that scatters the flag's messages across the earth.

"This year, my flag is going to say 'Fall down seven times. Get



Above: Debra Johnston-Visch helps Roe Konopa walk out to an area for fly fishing on the Au Sable River.

Left: Hand-made prayer flags are displayed during a session of Reeling and Healing of Michigan, a fishing retreat for women living with cancer.

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does over there. Can you feel how cold it is here?"

On this river, she's seen an eagle soaring overhead. She's watched herons fish along the river's edge. She's heard a bear splashing in its waters at night. But at the moment, she's a fly fisher reveling in a mid-morning hatch of blue-tipped olives — little bugs trout love to feed on.

"They call these 'holy waters,'" she says, "and you can see why."



The first night of the retreat, everyone gathers around a bonfire. Konopa gives out pine cones to burn, the kind that flames purple and turquoise and green.

She sends hers into the fire, saying it is in honor of all the "brave women, courageous women" living with breast cancer.

"I don't believe you can understand what it's like unless you've had it," she says.

A woman sitting near her, who has let others do most of the talking until then, hears her words and gives herself permission to say: "People don't realize how cold your head gets when you lose all your hair, even in the summer."

"Or that it hurts when your hair falls out," Konopa adds. "It feels like razor blades."

"I thought I was the only one," the woman says.

The Queen of the Fly has helped, just by being there, just by talking and listening.

"I don't realize sometimes (how long she's lived with cancer) until someone says, 'I've never seen you with hair,'" Konopa says.

This, too, is therapeutic: the sharing of symptoms, the telling of stories. But so is the laughter they are unafraid to share.

Johnston-Visch likes to say they "inject the retreats with laughter instead of chemotherapy."



Konopa is tired after lunch on Monday.

"I don't think I'll go out again," she says.

She doesn't sleep well at night, and she often is in excruciating pain, although only her

silence gives her condition away. She rallied long enough to go fishing in the morning with Johnston-Visch, there to get the fly on the hook, there to offer a steadying hand.

"More changes," Konopa says.

Before she got sick, she was the softball player everyone wanted on a team. Now she doesn't have the strength to sit on the sidelines many days. Aside from her family, her priorities are the Reeling and Healing retreats; the time she volunteers at Camp Bluebird, a camp for adult cancer patients; and her Tuesday night support groups at Hackley Hospital.

"I've had to change my passions," she says.

She finds peace in the river with its currents that constantly change, and unforeseen obstacles, and sometimes, even still waters.

And beautiful brown trout to catch.

Konopa stretches out again on the bench by the river late Monday afternoon, watching women new to fly fishing and waders, letting the pain medication take hold.

She wears a purple baseball cap identifying her as a "Fishing Goddess," a gift from a friend. She has on a shirt, another gift, plastered with the images of stone flies.

She will be on chemotherapy and pain medication, the strongest available, for the rest of her life. But it is here at the river where she gets most of her strength, drawn to the water that transforms her like someone anointed during a healing service.

"Wouldn't you like to go out?" she asks, maybe an hour after she's said she cannot. She pulls on her wading shoes and shorts and goes into waters taking her into a new direction than her morning trip.

She casts her line, and it is a thing of beauty — as much art as it is sport, its line arching just so, the fly floating effortlessly. A brown trout rises to the top, takes a nibble, but does not bite.

No matter. Roe Konopa, Queen of the Fly, is radiant.

"It's so good to be on the river," she says.