



Healing Waters

By TEMN Reporter Katy Tang



photo courtesy of Healing Waters

Ian takes his boat into Satan's Cesspool...
Woo hoo!

People facing HIV and AIDS now have a chance to enjoy a weekend of fun and excitement, thanks to a non-profit organization called Healing Waters. In 1996, a man named Cale Siler founded Healing Waters, which is based in San Francisco. After a life-altering experience, Siler felt he needed to start an organization to help those facing HIV and AIDS. Healing Waters hopes to enrich, inspire, and empower the lives of their participants through wilderness adventures.

Originally a raft and sea-kayaking guide, Siler thought wilderness adventures would be a great way to help those with HIV and AIDS focus on aspects of life other than disease. "One of the chief reasons that we do

[wilderness trips] is so people can forget about [the disease], the medications they're taking, and just have a weekend where they don't dwell on those aspects of their lives," says Siler.

Siler believes that in addition to the medical and physical aspects of fighting disease, there are also other very important components. Healing Waters provides a great opportunity for participants to engage in psychological, emotional, and spiritual exploration. "Our trips really provide that serenity of nature and the exhilaration of using your body. Just being out there in the sunshine is a huge boost, and we've heard that from our participants," continues Siler.

Every weekend, Piera Damonte, the Program Director for Healing Waters, organizes trips for about 8 to 12 participants. These trips range from sea-kayaking and rafting in the summer to cross-country skiing in the winter. A new back-packing program has also been started for the fall season. Due to high demand, participants are limited to



photo courtesy of Healing Waters

A mother and daughter prepare for a day on the South Fork of the American River

two trips per year. Healing Waters takes an average of 400 people on trips each year. Trips occur every weekend of the year, except in November, during which Healing Waters fundraises. For each trip, Healing Waters spends about \$500 for food, gas, camping, and permits for campsites. Their participants each pay \$15 per trip. In the year 2001, Healing Waters hopes to expand their program with additional trips so that they can involve even more participants.

Scouting for the optimum locations to hold the trips is a major reason for the success of Healing Waters. "Occasionally, Cale and I will go out and visit a spot. We have very specific requirements for every spot that we go," says Damonte. "For instance, if it's a kayaking place, it has to be a place that's protected from the wind. We don't want to get into a dangerous situation," explains Damonte. In addition to safety requirements, Damonte notes that they also survey for scenery and wildlife so that participants can enjoy the feeling of being in the wilderness. "We definitely look for a quality of wildness and beauty when we scout our locations," says Damonte.

Words of Gratitude



photo courtesy of Healing Waters

Kayaking - a calm and peaceful way to experience water and nature

Many participants of Healing Waters have written to express their gratitude. Susan Fletcher felt as if her life was over after being diagnosed with HIV. After spending three weeks in the hospital and one week in ICU, she became determined to fight the disease. Through some research, Fletcher discovered Healing Waters and felt it was a great opportunity for her to go whitewater rafting - something she had always wanted to do. She worried about getting injured, her medications, and not feeling well from taking her medications. "With your organization, none of that was a problem," Fletcher wrote to Healing Waters. "It [Healing Waters] was set up for us. If we had a problem, things would be taken care of," she continued.

Healing Waters has inspired Fletcher's interest in becoming a guide for whitewater rafting and kayaking. "Thank goodness for Healing Waters and your staff of the best volunteers that I have ever seen in an organization," said Fletcher.

Another participant, Lisa Croydon, who works with the UCLA CARE Center, wrote to thank Healing Waters for a "life enhancing experience." Croydon felt that Healing Waters was able to make everyone feel capable of doing something, regardless of his or her athletic abilities. "Healing Waters is such an appropriate name for your organization. I left there feeling not just physically stronger and more capable, but also realizing that the boundaries to which I have grown accustomed to are more mental than anything else," wrote Croydon. Croydon feels that the most special thing about Healing Waters is everyone's togetherness. "I am feeling empowered in every sense of the word," she says.

Further Resources

Healing Waters' website: www.hwaters.org/

2-minute audio reports:

- Healing Waters (part I): www.scienceinterchange.org/media/sf_tang_healingwaters1.ram
- Healing Waters (part II): www.scienceinterchange.org/media/sf_tang_healingwaters2.ram