



Learning to Fly

The Mayfly Project brings fun and fellowship to foster youth by putting fly rods in their hands. | BY ASHLEY STIMPSON

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE MAYFLY PROJECT

Over the course of fostering 15 children, Fredericksburg, Virginia, resident Scott Sevigny had developed a foolproof routine for helping kids get through their first difficult night away from home.

“With the new kids, they might be crying, might be missing their parents, and so I’d say, ‘Hey, have you ever gone fishing before?’ They’d kind of look at me like ‘What does that have to do with anything?’” he remembered. “And then I’d tell them, ‘Well, you should get some sleep because we’re leaving at 4 a.m.’”

Getting up early to go fly fishing had helped Sevigny cope with tough times in his own life. Learning he had sustained a traumatic brain injury in Iraq had been a “big setback” for the Army and Air Force veteran. It was Project Healing Waters—a nonprofit that provides fly fishing instruction to active-duty and veteran service members—that got him on the water for the first time. “It was so relaxing and calming and just the camaraderie that I needed,” he said. Since he wanted his foster kids to experience those same feelings, it seemed only natural he would take them fishing, too.

Sevigny was volunteering with Project Healing Waters at a fly fishing show in New Jersey when he stumbled upon a booth for The Mayfly Project. The nationwide nonprofit uses fly fishing to help children in foster care build self esteem and find joy and connection in the outdoors.

“I thought, wait a minute, I’m kind of doing this already,” Sevigny said. By April 2022, he had founded a Fredericksburg chapter, pairing seven kids with fly fishing mentors on the banks of Motts Run Reservoir.

In the three seasons since, the group has been the recipient of a grant from the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources (DWR) through their Wildlife Grant Program, and two more chapters have popped up in other regions of the state, getting more kids on the water. “To see

them forget about their problems, forget about the court system and just get to be normal kids—it’s so amazing,” said Sevigny.

Something They Can Call their Own

The Mayfly Project was founded in Arkansas in 2015 by Jess Westbrook, who, like Sevigny, had found comfort and healing in fly fishing after experiencing frequent and severe panic attacks. At the time, Westbrook was mentoring foster kids through his church and witnessing firsthand the challenges they were facing.

Children in foster care have typically endured emotional and physical trauma and, for many, adulthood can be just as challenging. Studies show that more than 20 percent of foster youth will experience homelessness after the age of 18, while 42 percent will have a run-in with the judicial system.

Westbrook and his wife, who live in Arkansas, launched The Mayfly Project to give foster kids rest and adventure in the outdoors, while empowering them with a sense of accomplishment and confidence they could apply in other areas of their lives. In 2016, the Westbrooks joined forces with mental health professional Kaitlin Barnhart and The Mayfly Project went national. Today, the nonprofit has chapters in more than 30 states that have served more than 1,400 kids. There are also three chapters in the United Kingdom.

According to the project’s mission statement: “The Mayfly Project is a 501(c)(3) organization that uses fly fishing as a catalyst to mentor children in foster care. Our mission is to support children in foster care through fly fishing and introduce them to their local water ecosystems, with a hope that connecting them to a rewarding hobby will provide an opportunity for foster children to have fun, feel



supported, and develop a meaningful connection with the outdoors.”

As participants in The Mayfly Project, every child works one on one with a mentor during five sessions called “stages,” just like the life cycle of a mayfly. During the stages, kids learn skills like casting, fly-tying, knot-tying, and line management. They are also exposed to conservation ideas like the importance of clean water and catch and release. At the end of the program, each child is gifted their own gear so that they can continue to pursue the hobby.

“The only complaint we ever get from foster parents is the kids try sleeping with the fishing pole,” said Sevigny. “These kids sometimes have nothing, maybe just the clothes on their back. The new gear: it’s something that they can call their own.”

Finding Brain Rest in the Outdoors

It was a Mayfly Project sticker—designed by renowned flyfishing artist Andrea Larko—on a fishing guide’s water bottle that caught Scott Barrier’s attention. After the guide, a mentor in one of the Tennessee chapters, explained the mission of the organization to Barrier, the avid fly angler called his wife Helen.

“I told her we’re going to start a Mayfly chapter in Roanoke,” he remembered. Like Sevigny, the couple had volunteered for Project Healing Waters and didn’t need to be sold on the therapeutic power of a day on the river. Helen also had background in working with at-risk youth.

It was spring of 2023, and the Barriers were hopeful they could get a chapter up and running in a year.

“The founders have an incredible program they put together, so it’s like taking a cookie cutter and applying it to your own area,” said Scott. “But you have to fundraise, and you have to find mentors.” Each mentor must pass a background check and undergo their own training—from the basics of fly fishing (previous knowledge of the sport is not required) to how to

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successfully support children who have experienced trauma.

Drawing on their network from years of community service and fly fishing, the Barriers were able to recruit 12 mentors in just 12 months, including two local judges who often oversaw juvenile cases. Through a presentation to the City of Roanoke’s Department of Social Services, the Barriers were able to recruit their first class of kids.

In March 2024, the Roanoke chapter of The Mayfly Project held its first session to go over knot tying and casting basics. The class was held indoors to avoid any weather-related complications. “One of the biggest goals is not to disappoint the children; they’ve had a lot of disappointment before,” said Scott. “And to cancel due to snow would be devastating.”

Finally, it was time to get on the water. The outdoor sessions took place on Scott and Helen’s land in Bent Mountain, where two ponds and a creek allowed the kids to learn about different kinds of ecosystems—and catch different kinds of fish.

“The first time a child catches a fish and goes to get it out of the net, they can hardly stand it,” said Helen. “All they want is to get a picture of it.”

But the true triumph of the

Participants in The Mayfly Project learn basic fly tying and knot tying before they start casting on the water.



A Mayfly Project day ends in smiles for all.



program, say the Barriers, can't be captured in a photograph.

"The kids find brain rest, which is something The Mayfly Project promotes," Scott said. "Maybe they found it listening to the wind, or in the water, or in being so focused on fishing."

"We're teaching them to fly fish, but it's not about fish," added Helen. "It's a vehicle to help them better trust adults and show them people care."

I Think I Laughed Just as Much as the Kids Did

Ann Kovats says she "jumped at the opportunity" to be a mentor for the Roanoke chapter of The Mayfly Project, despite admittedly knowing nothing about fishing. "It was the kids," she explained.

Kovats said that the mentors, kids, and foster parents—who are always invited to sessions—bonded fast. "We laughed, we shared, it was an incredible group." When it came to fishing, the children, many of whom had never held a rod before, were quick studies.

"They had a passion to fish; they were antsy to get out there and go fishing. They wanted to learn," she said. "They were fully engaged the entire time, with so much energy."

The group met every other week for four to five hours at a time, rotating through a series of stations to learn new skills and taking breaks for important matters like snacks. Sometimes the snacks inspired a bit of superstition.

"The boy I was with, he hadn't caught anything, and I gave him a

pack of powdered donuts," Kovats said. "And then he cast his line and of course he caught a fish. So that was our little thing, each session I came with a pack of donuts to make sure he caught a fish."

Sevigny says that being a mentor has very little to do with fishing. "You don't have to be great at fly fishing, as long as you're great with kids," he noted. "Sometimes the kids just want to skip rocks and talk—we meet the kids where they're at."

The Barriers saw firsthand the connection the mentors make with participants.

"When we said goodbye in the last session, there wasn't a dry eye in the house—kids or adults," said Scott. "We feel somewhat bad we can only do one program a year, thanks to the weather



Mayfly Project mentors teach fishing skills and much more.



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— HELEN BARRIER

and manpower. But everyone is so passionate about it."

Kovats, for one, will be returning for next year's program. "We had a ball! I think I laughed just as much as the kids did."

Creating Lifelong Anglers

In 2023, The Mayfly Project was awarded a Virginia Wildlife Grant through DWR and the Wildlife Foundation of Virginia.

"With that extra money, we got to do some cool stuff," said Sevigny. "We had more kids and could rent waders, coolers, life vests. It was a tremendous help." Perhaps best of all, the money allowed the group to rent boats. "Some of these kids had never been on a boat before, so that was huge," he continued.

In all, it costs about \$780 for each child to participate in The Mayfly Project, most of which goes to buy the gear—the rod, reel, net, and flies—that the kids take home at the end of the program.

"During the fifth outing, we say, 'here is your equipment,'" said Helen, who notes that the group also tries to outfit foster parents with gear, too. "That's the beauty of this program—to watch the kids develop, to learn to respect the outdoors, and to give them a lifelong skill they can continue to practice when it's all over."

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