

# Reel Therapy: West Haven woman offers free fishing trips to disabled veterans

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By Amanda Pinto, Register Staff

WEST HAVEN -- It's early evening, and along the west wall of New Haven Harbor, Brian Youssef is reeling in the first catch of the day.

Quick to grin and joke with the other anglers, Youssef, 25, hauls in and poses with the keeper, a 29-inch striped bass he'll enjoy after it's cleaned with the help of crew members.

The expedition Youssef's on is more than just a free chance to relax on Long Island Sound. It's what boat captain Kathy Granfield calls "a different kind of therapy."

Youssef's fellow fisherman, Melvin Morales, calls it "a floating hospital with no doctors."

Granfield, of West Haven, operates Veteran Angler Charters, which offers free fishing trips to disabled veterans such as Youssef, who lives in New Haven.

Youssef, whose service in the Marine Corps took him to 38 states and seven countries, and Morales, an Army veteran who was deployed during the Gulf War, are two of four such veterans who have boarded the Black Mariah.

"What I like about being out here is, it's common ground for everybody, we tend to share many different experiences, even though we served in different years, in different conflicts, we served our country," said Morales, 42, of Ansonia. "We tend to become one family, we tend to support each other. ... Every time we go out, it's a journey that you don't want to end."

But Granfield worried recently the expeditions could be cut short. Although it is an effort, she's vowed to continue until she's "broke," the trips cost about \$800 when high insurance costs and gas prices are factored in, she said.

Granfield, a North Branford eighth-grade science teacher, has about \$2,500 to use for VA Charters. She needs to raise \$15,000 to \$20,000 to keep it going, and would ideally like to get enough funds to take a group of veterans out every weekend.

She said she is looking for donors and sponsorships.

"Personally, it's not about fishing at all," Granfield said of the trips. "I think the real benefit is the chance, for a short period of time, (for veterans) to get away from everything, because something happens when the boat



Clockwise from top left, Veteran Angler Charters crewmen Mike Pollio and Scott McNulty, Gulf War Army veteran Melvin Morales, Marine Corps veteran Ray Dishen and Iraq War veteran Brian Youssef. (Brad Horrigan/Register)

leaves the dock. I don't know what it is, but for those four to six hours, it's almost like what's going on at home isn't going on."

Granfield, whose father was a veteran, came up with the idea in 2007, shortly after she learned that in a recent year, there were more veteran suicides than there were soldiers killed in action.

She and co-founder Pat Juliano took their first group of veterans out on Granfield's rare, 34-foot two-engine Wilbur in 2009.

For Ray Sekelsky, a Navy hospital corpsman enrolled in a post-traumatic stress disorder treatment program at the Newington Veterans Affairs hospital, the trips offer relief.

"Even if you don't catch anything, it's just being out on the water, the calmness, the serenity of being on the water," said Sekelsky, 46, who lives in Pennsylvania and volunteered on the boat during the trip.

Morales, who also deals with PTSD, as well as vision impairments from a traumatic brain injury, said he also finds "peace" in the expeditions.

He shares with his shipmates stories about his time in the Army and about Army Staff Sgt. Thomas Vitagliano, a West Haven man he recruited into the service who was killed in Iraq in 2005. Morales wears a ranger lanyard in Vitagliano's memory, he said.

The veterans are sharing the experiences and moving forward -- anglers Morales, Youssef and Marine Corps veteran Ray Dishen, 25, are all students at Southern Connecticut State University.

Dishen, who lives in New Haven, is a senior on track to graduate summa cum laude, he said.

As the evening stretches on, Dishen too, makes a catch. Granfield hopes there are many more to come.

"Every trip we've come back, the guys are so appreciative and you can see the difference in a group of men from when they go out ... and when they get off," she said. "Usually, emails get exchanged, numbers get exchanged, they've got friends that understand their service experience. It's a big gain."

Donations are accepted at [www.veterananglercharters.org](http://www.veterananglercharters.org) or at P.O. Box 504, West Haven 06516.

<http://www.nhregister.com/general-news/20110704/reel-therapy-west-haven-woman-offers-free-fishing-trips-to-disabled-veterans-video>