

## Fishing for a Future – Reader’s Digest August 2001

“Hey, Niblock, what are you doing here? You don’t have a hope of winning this tournament.”

The teenager’s taunt was like a knife twisting in the heart of Jeff Niblock, a 16-year-old troubled youth in Port Coquitlam in British Columbia’s Lower Mainland.

The teens were members of opposing teams gathered at a local lake to compete in the region’s first high school fly-fishing championships. Niblock had looked forward to this day for several weeks.

But now the verbal barbs shouted by the young captain of an opposing team were getting to him. Under his short brown hair, the back of Niblock’s neck flushed red.

“You can’t even catch a fish,” he heard. “Why don’t you just go home?”

One year before, Niblock’s reaction would have been swift – and violent. He would have answered the opposing captain’s taunts with punches.

But he’d changed since becoming involved in his high school’s fly-fishing program co-directed by Jeff Wertz, a custodian the students respectfully called The Preacher.

Instead of confronting his adversary, Niblock quietly walked away. After tying on a new fly, he proceeded to catch and release 47 rainbow trout in a half-hour. Niblock placed second overall, winning a prize for catching the most fish.

To Wertz, 45, the incident was an affirmation of his efforts to use fly-fishing to reach out to teens that school administrators tend to brand “problem kids.”

Wertz used to be one of them. He grew up in nearby Port Moody, which -- along with the cities of Port Coquitlam and Coquitlam – comprise a region known as Tri-Cities. In his early teens, neighborhood bullies regularly picked on Wertz.

A single child, he stayed away from home to avoid his verbally abusive, alcoholic father. He became a member of a gang that engaged in street fights, drag racing, bootlegging, stealing auto parts and siphoning gas. Fighting was a way to earn a place in the gang hierarchy.

Through it all, however, Wertz sought refuge from his rough street and home life by fly-fishing in local creeks, rivers and lakes.

He’d started fishing when he was four, while floating on a raft in the Huck Finn ride at Disneyland, California. Using a cane pole, hook, worm and cork bobber, he caught a small catfish.

Later, family friends took him on fishing expeditions, strengthening his interest and honing his skills. At the age of 17, Wertz discovered fly-fishing. He sold his drum set to buy his first fly rod and reel.

In his late teens, Wertz started rejecting his law-breaking ways. He’d narrowly avoided being arrested, and had seen friends thrown in jail. One friend died in a car accident while racing, and another was killed when he passed out on a railway track and was run over by a train.

Determined not to end up a teenaged statistic, Wertz turned to Christianity, and quit drinking and fighting.

After high school, Weltz worked as an apprentice mechanic and boxcar repairman. He also started mending the relationship with his father, who by now had given up booze. Yet low self-esteem and self-doubt kept plaguing Weltz.

One night on television, he watched The Reverend Jesse Jackson, an American political and civil rights activist, visit ghettos and schools in poor Chicago neighborhoods. He was telling young people that, no matter their backgrounds, each one is important and has a key place in this world.

The message deeply touched Weltz. He *did* matter, he *was* important. Acting on a counselor's recommendation, Weltz decided to study to become an ecclesiastical minister. He believed his mission in life was to help troubled kids, giving them the guidance they needed to turn their lives around. He wanted to give youths the helping hand he never had while growing up.

Eventually, Weltz decided against a career in the ministry. He opted instead to become a school custodian because it gave him several weeks off each year to go fly-fishing and be with his wife of eight years, Kim, and daughters Morgan, 11, and Joanna, four.

When Weltz landed a job in 1996 at Terry Fox Secondary School in Port Coquitlam, it didn't take long for staff to learn of his passion for fly-fishing. Two teachers, both ardent fly fishers, talked to him about forming a fly fishing club for students.

Initially, Weltz was reluctant; after all, his job was swabbing down hallways, not teaching kids. But his wife encouraged him. "Go for it," Kim urged. "It's what you've always wanted and it will be a good challenge for you."

Kim was a restaurant hostess when she met Jeff, who used to come in for coffee with friends after church. The single mother was smitten by his shyness, and his compassion. Their future together was sealed when Morgan, aged 18 months, climbed onto his knee and hugged him the first time they met.

With Kim's blessing, Weltz agreed to be a co-leader of the fly-fishing club. After receiving \$100 from the athletics department for fly-tying materials, the Terry Fox Flyfishing Club was launched in November 1996. Some members started calling Weltz "The Preacher" after learning of his divinity studies and seeing how much he cared about them.

One weekend, a student named Rob (\*not his real name), was busted for trafficking in marijuana. At that week's club meeting, Rob joked about the incident in front of the others.

But the room grew silent when Weltz bluntly warned him he was headed toward bigger trouble.

"I grew up with a lot of guys who went the route you're going," Weltz told Rob.

"You might be impressing your friends now, but unless you change your ways, you're heading straight to a life in jail. I don't want to see that happen."

One afternoon in March 1998, Jeff Niblock ambled into his first club meeting. An only child who was two when his father left, Niblock grew up in a tough neighborhood. Fighting was a way of life.

Recently transferred from another school into Grade 10 at Terry Fox, the angry young man had spent two years in alternate schools for fighting and striking a teacher.

While sitting side by side tying flies, Weltz encouraged Niblock to talk about his life. As the teenager described his brushes with authority and home life, Weltz was gripped by a sense of déjà vu. Niblock was a carbon copy of himself almost three decades earlier.

He also reminded Weltz of the troubled youths he'd visited in juvenile detention centers while studying for the ministry. "I know where you're coming from," Weltz told Niblock. "I'm here for you anytime."

Weltz kept the dialogue open, and Niblock stayed out of trouble at school. For Weltz, the crowning glory came when the teen opted not to fight his taunting opponent at the high school fly-fishing tournament.

The club grew to eight members. Among the new members were Mike Morris, a short-fused, authority-flouting youth with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), and Tony Ingimundson, who also had a reputation as a fighter and challenger of school administration.

Along with their troublemaker image, a common thread linked the youths: a deep love of fly-fishing.

"Jeff has a little thing in his brain that switches to a different mode when he gets fishing," observes Nadine Allen, Niblock's mother.

After one particularly nasty school fight, a counselor recommended Niblock take an anger management course. He refused, saying fly-fishing achieves the same result.

Once, after arguing with his mother, Niblock trashed his bedroom in a rage, smashing a lamp and throwing his headboard across the room. Then he saw his fly rod on the floor. He picked it up, walked to the nearby Coquitlam River and started casting. Although he didn't catch a fish, his mood changed dramatically. Anger was replaced with a sense of peace. Niblock returned home and cleaned his room.

For Ingimundson, 16, the fly-fishing club represented a chance to make friends while doing an activity he loved with an adult he respected. Weltz made it work because he taught without preaching, and treated the members as equals.

"You don't even need to catch fish," says Ingimundson. "If you learn how to do something new that day, then you have reason to be proud."

Typically, the group met weekly, after regular classes ended about 3 p.m. As the members trickled in and started setting up fly-tying vises, they'd talk to Weltz about problems at school or home.

Weltz was supportive, but wouldn't always take their sides. "Your parents are perfect," he told them. "But they are only showing their love for you by trying to teach you right from wrong." Weltz urged the youths to set a good example "to prove you're not a problem."

He worked hard at building their self-esteem. The students stopped cutting classes, and applied themselves more to their studies.

Occasionally, things got rough. Weltz intervened when the teens became too rambunctious or argumentative "There's nothing wrong with kidding around and having fun," he'd say. "But you don't need to insult each other, or push each other verbally or physically to make a point."

One meeting, Rob was bullying another student. He punched, chased and ridiculed him mercilessly. Weltz, painfully remembering being bullied as a kid, sternly warned Rob he'd kick him out of the club if he didn't leave the boy alone.

Weltz was taken aback when Niblock jumped in to berate Rob.

“Leave the guy alone,” Niblock told him. “Don’t you know what you’re doing to this poor guy? He’ll be scarred for life.”

The bullying promptly stopped.

For two and a half hours each week, the students transformed bits of feather, fur, yarn and other synthetic materials into colorful, delicate flies designed to imitate insects and other natural fish food. They took weekend fishing trips to local streams, lakes and rivers.

They watched seals and bald eagles diving for the same fish they were trying to catch. They saw salmon fighting their way upstream to spawn, then weaken and die, their decomposing bodies left to provide life-giving nutrition. They came to appreciate the importance of clean, unpolluted water.

The students learned to read tides and weather, and to understand the best times to fish. Weltz showed them why it’s more effective to wade upstream in flowing water, because fish face the current and wading downstream will spook them.

He related it to life. “If you take the easy route and walk down, then you’re going to lose all your opportunities. But if you go up the stream, which is harder because you’re going against the flow, you’re going to have a lot of opportunities. The key is don’t quit.”

Around the school, the fly-fishing group became known as the Bad Boys Club. In the 1938 movie *Boys Town*, the character played by Spencer Tracy says there is no such thing as a bad boy. Weltz agrees, saying there are only “misdirected” youths waiting to be given a chance.

One of those kids was Mike Morris, a 17-year-old, six-foot, one-inch bundle of pent-up energy. He’d been fishing with his dad, Duane, since he was 18 months old. A fly-fisher since age five, he was one of the club’s best casters.

Morris had a rep as a mouthy, pugnacious guy who had trouble following rules in school, especially without his daily ADD medication. Duane Morris describes his son as a “square peg pushed into the round hole” because he doesn’t fit in to other school activities or clubs.

But Weltz looked at the skinny kid with bleached blonde hair, watched his effortless casting and saw huge potential.

In 1999, Weltz recommended Morris as a member of the Canadian team competing that summer in the World Youth Flyfishing Championships in Ireland. In his application, Morris had written an essay lamenting what he called the stereotyping of teens as the “bad-asses of the universe.”

When Weltz told teachers at Terry Fox that Morris had made the team, they were incredulous. “*That* Mike Morris?” they would ask.

In autumn 1999, after two years at Terry Fox, the prospect of a shorter walk to work and more overtime – paid in precious time off – lured Weltz to transfer to Kwayhquiltum Middle School, a gray-brick building offering Grades 6-8. Several parents, whose older kids had belonged to the club at Terry Fox, asked Weltz to start a fly-fishing club there.

The Kwayhquit Fly Fishers Club was born.

Niblock, Morris and Ingimundson offered to help. Niblock had dropped out of high school after Grade 11 to work at a movie theatre and as an apprentice gasfitter. He’s

planning to return to school to get his Grade 12 before following his dream to run a fishing lodge.

Morris had transferred to another school and Ingimundson was still at Terry Fox, where the fly-fishing club unfortunately had folded after Weltz left.

Although Niblock, Morris and Ingimundson – the core group of the first fly-fishing club – have gone their separate ways, they volunteer their time to help Weltz's younger group – even if it means giving up the odd Saturday.

It was overcast and threatening rain early one Saturday morning in December 2000 when several members of the Kwayhquit Fly Fishers gathered in the school parking lot. The kids buzzed with excited anticipation of a day's fishing at the Stave River, a tributary of the Fraser River.

As 9 a.m. approached, the group became edgy; Weltz, who is usually early, hadn't shown up yet. When a compact car pulled into the parking lot, the kids erupted in an excited chorus of "Jeff's here, Jeff's here."

As Weltz emerged from the car, youngsters wanting to know why he was late mobbed him. Car trouble.

At the Stave River, a few coho finned nervously in a shallow spawning channel. In a quiet back eddy, dozens of blotchy-scaled chum salmon were slowly dying after spawning. The stench of rotting fish hung heavy in the cool air.

Weltz helped the kids string their rods and watched mother hen-like as they cast their flies. They cheered wildly when Weltz, wading in metre-deep water, slipped on an algae-slickened rock and got soaked. "Have a nice swim?" teased a chuckling Harold Hejazi, 11.

Suddenly, 12-year-old Nam Siu, a Grade 7 student, hooked a chum. Thirty minutes later, Weltz helped Nam land the five-kilogram salmon. "First fish on a fly rod, first fish on a fly rod," an excited Nam shouted over and over. "Good job," replied Weltz, his Fu-Manchu mustache stretched to his cheekbones in a broad smile.

A few hundred metres upstream, Mike Morris fished alongside a quiet, fair-haired youth. Grade 7 student Ian Davis, 12, was casting a fly effortlessly and accurately in a style similar to Morris's. It was no coincidence.

Morris, with a patience few thought he had, had taught Davis how to cast the year before. The troubled teenager had become the teacher. Under Morris's mentorship, Ian Davis had turned into one of the middle school's best fly fishers and fly tiers.

Ian's father, Cam Davis, is even more of a novice; Ian taught him after he joined the club. Cam praises Weltz and the fly-fishing program for boosting his son's self-esteem and confidence in other areas of his life, including schoolwork.

But the non-assuming, soft-spoken Weltz isn't in it for parental plaudits.

"We all get opportunities to make a difference in other people's lives and it's up to us to decide whether to do it or not," he says.

"I decided this is how I wanted to make a difference."

