

# Common ground

*Healing retreats build community and offer a break from day-to-day worries*

Jumping off a dock into a cold mountain lake, rappelling down a cliff, making lanterns in a Luminaries workshop, learning yoga, joking around a fire pit, sleeping in rustic cabins with other HIV-positive campers...these are just some of the activities at BCPWA Society's peer-driven healing retreats at Loon Lake Camp near Golden Ears Park. The three-day retreats for members have been held since 1987.

The retreats change lives, instill hope through others' stories, and build friendships.

The experience helps people see that they are not alone, that other HIV-positive men and women who initially seem different, share the same fears and dreams.

Participants run the gamut: grandfathers, youth, moms, singles, couples, Asian, Hispanic, Aboriginal. They are gay, straight, and transgendered. But they have one thing in common: they are all HIV-positive.

For many, the highlight of the retreat is the daily group discussions. Participants gather in small groups facilitated by trained peers. Group members share their personal stories and discuss chosen topics. This small group process builds lasting relationships and assures no one is lost in the dynamics of the larger group of up to 50 participants.

An energetic Opening Circle and a more introspective Closing Ceremony bring the entire group of participants,

volunteers, facilitators, and staff together to honour the community experience and reflect on time spent in nature.

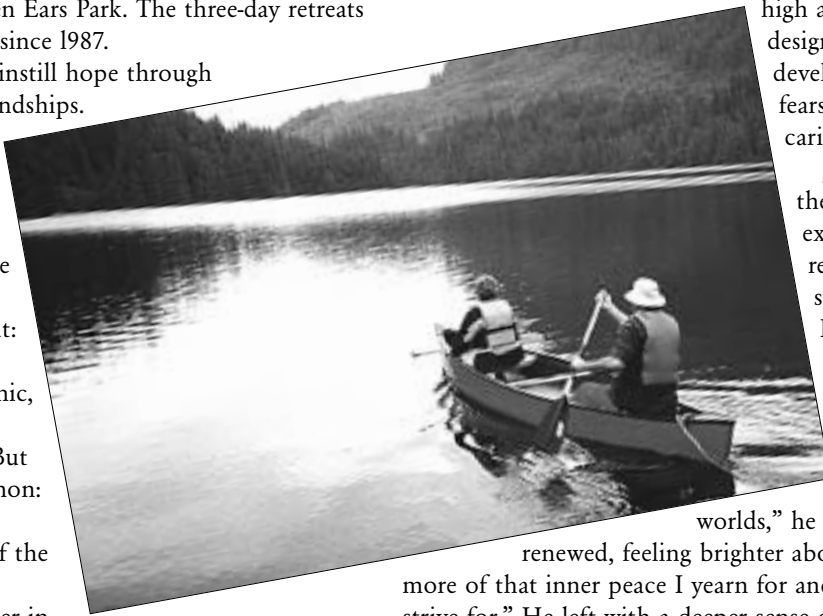
In addition to activities such as hiking, swimming, canoeing, and healing workshops, volunteer professionals offer various types of healing bodywork. This year, there was also a

high and low ropes course, designed to help participants develop trust and face fears in a supportive, caring environment.

John Bishop describes the retreat as a "five-star" experience, thanks to the retreat team and beautiful surroundings. "Loon Lake offered me the chance to explore the peaceful, natural world surrounding me, as well as my inner spiritual and emotional

worlds," he says. "I came away renewed, feeling brighter about life and with a bit more of that inner peace I yearn for and that outer grace I strive for." He left with a deeper sense of communion from sharing a larger experience with friends and peers.

"It's a remarkable life-enhancing experience," says Mark Leonard, a seasoned retreat camper. "I made lasting friendships and was moved by remarkable stories of courage—and found hope at seeing so many with a renewed strength and vitality." ⊕



**EL PITOTE. TICKLE PICKLE.  
CAPTAIN HOWDY. EXCALIBUR.**



Whatever you call it, thanks for keeping it safe.

[GayMenPlaySafe.com](http://GayMenPlaySafe.com)

Produced by AIDS Vancouver and a national advisory team of partner organizations working in HIV and AIDS