

Go with the Flow

by Kimberly Refosco



Keystone Lake, Keystone State Park, Westmoreland County

Much like the consistent ebb and flow of a waterway, my fishing experiences have ebbed and flowed through life's changes and continues trickling into the waters of many others in their own journey.

I grew up learning to fish with my father, Barry Colbert. When I was young, he would sometimes come into my room and wake me up well before dawn for a day of fishing. Living near Pittsburgh, we would often visit Keystone Lake, Westmoreland County; North Park Lake, Allegheny County; Lake Arthur, Butler County; and Twin Lakes, Westmoreland County. At that time, I would not touch the worms or the fish. My dad would have to get me all set up and sometimes immediately replace the bait I lost or unhook my fish. He was unable to do much fishing himself, with all my upkeep, and in retrospect, the only reason I can think of bringing along someone so needy was to begin to instill in me a lifelong love for the sport.

As I grew older, I continued to fish with my dad. I learned more about setting my own line and catching and releasing my fish safely. Still, no live worm bait for me though. We worked more as a team and fished some larger waters, like Lake Erie, and eventually tried Atlantic saltwater fishing. After some time, I grew curious about learning to fly fish, an interest we did not share. After several lessons, unsuccessful self-experiences, then back to lessons again, I cannot say that I always know what I'm doing. However, I can say that I'm much improved. My first experience fly fishing at Ohiopyle in waders on the first day of trout season was magical. The influx of knowledge of which lure to use in which situation and at which depth was fascinating. Learning the way trout behave and how to mimic the graceful dance of an insect is an art. The feeling of finally getting a cast just right and hooking that first trout was exhilarating. I was hooked. I don't always know what I am doing. My knots need a lot of work, I get frustrated, and there are plenty of days with no fish. Yet, time in and on the water creates a connection of belonging to the outdoors. It's a reminder that water and nature links us all together.

In 2019, the ebb and flow of life turned into raging waters. I lost my dad, and I quit fishing. Being near the water always created in me a sense of peace. Now, I didn't want peace. I was angry and sad, and I intended to stay that way. In fact, I did, for a long time. But, the waters continue to flow, and eventually, my buddy, Jimbo (James Baker), invited me back to the water. He treated me like my dad that first time back. He readied my line, weights and baits despite my know-how.

Jimbo let me have the "dad" moments I was craving. He would laugh at me and call me "silly" every time I named the trout. Doesn't everyone? He would hold them properly in the water until they swam away. My peace eased back into calmer waters after some time.

By now, I had become a volunteer leader with Outdoor Afro, a national nonprofit organization dedicated to inspiring black connections in nature. As a black woman and fly angler in western Pennsylvania, I became aware of not seeing many faces that looked like mine on the water. Fishing has always been a part of black, African and African American cultures, as both a necessity for food as well as recreation. Still, I noticed some barriers in my particular nook of the state that may also cause barriers for all who wish to fish. Location and transportation can be hurdles for any city dwellers, as quite a bit of traveling is needed to get to the lakes in and around Allegheny County. Gear may be expensive, especially if you are not sure yet that you are interested in investing in the sport. Fear may be a factor, with historical trauma associated with women, at times, and black and brown people being alone in woods amongst hunters and anglers that may not be welcoming to outdoor diversity. As a volunteer leader, I began working with the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission education program. Together, we have been able to provide multiple fishing programs for Outdoor Afro participants in the region, connecting more people to their own aquatic journeys. Outdoor Afro, Pittsburgh, has also been able to partner with Venture Outdoors in leading kayaking trips for the group. Eventually, we plan to combine the fun with kayak fishing. I, myself, am still mastering walking and chewing gum at the same time, so I am curious how my kayak fishing will go, but that's the goal—to try something new, challenge myself and to do it with the people I'm most connected.

Recently, I lost my Jimbo, my newfound "fishing-dad." And, once again, it's difficult to get back on the water. I have yet to pick up a rod these past 8 months. Though, this time, Jimbo and my dad made me realize that it's not just for me. This time, I have folks relying on me to continue to create fishing programs, to teach them how to set the line, to teach them about different bait (that I will now touch with garden gloves), and to learn about different lures and fly tying. The water is not always calm. It will ebb and flow, and sometimes be tumultuous, but I will continue to find my way back to the water. ☐



The author's father, Barry Colbert



The author's friend, Jimbo (James Baker)