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Wellness, weight-loss retreat uses mountains as medicine

[Karen Chávez](#), kchavez@citizen-times.com Published 8:56 a.m. ET June 16, 2017 | Updated 55 minutes ago



(Photo: Courtesy of Denman Bennett Images)

LAKE TOXAWAY - Dawnrae Wilson arrived at Skyterra Wellness Retreat in early April as a self-described broken person.

She was 29, working as a graphic designer in Charlotte, and so miserable with her life, her weight, her emotional pain, that Wilson was actively considering assisted suicide.

She wasn't looking for a miracle pill – she had self-medicated enough – but for someone or something to pull her out of the dark hole her life had become. Endless Googling for wellness and weight loss retreats led her to Skyterra, a magically beautiful getaway surrounded by state park and national forest land in the scenic resort town of Transylvania County.

Wilson checked in, and 10 weeks later, on June 16, she was set to “graduate” into a new life, with so much happiness in her voice, it was sometimes hard for her to get the words out quickly enough.

“In my teen years I went through a very difficult personal situation. My mom and I talked about what would be most beneficial for me. We wanted something like Skyterra, but it didn't exist. I looked at a Buddhist retreat in Tibet and a yoga retreat in the Maldives, and about 30 other wellness, health-related resorts,” Wilson said.

“During my latest research I found Skyterra. I remember telling my mom, “That place now exists. Someone created it for me.”

Even in a nearly blinding downpour on the day visitors met with 16 guests at Skyterra, the name of the health, fitness and weight loss spa shone through the wet air and the dripping leaves.

Now in operation a year in the scenic resort town in Transylvania County, Skyterra has welcomed some 300 guests who come for a week or for months to get intense about their physical, mental and emotional well-being. A big part of the spa's philosophy on helping to heal a person's whole body is based on the therapeutic effects of the outdoors.

Science backs up the feeling that being active, or simply being in nature, in the forest, in green spaces beyond offices, noise, computers, blinking screens and beeping text messages, can result in positive psychological and physical benefits, said Sue Crowell, Skyterra founder.



Skyterra is a health and wellness program centered around each person's unique journey. The facility includes a variety of fitness and wellness classes and activities, with everything from yoga and aquatic chi to hiking. (Photo: Maddy Jones/mjones@citizen-times.com)

She did her research, and said that learning to mindfully soak up the fragrance and peacefulness of a forest has been shown to reduce stress, anxiety, and blood pressure.

A literature review study published in Health Promotion International in 2005 found that in the past few hundred years as people have become increasingly disconnected from the outdoors, shifting from rural to urban areas, there has also been an increase in non-communicable diseases such as coronary heart disease, diabetes and cancer, as well as mental, behavioral and social health problems.

A 2015 study published in Proceedings of the National Academy of Science, found that a walk in the woods can be a powerful mood booster. People who walked for 90 minutes in a natural area, as opposed to those who walked in a high-traffic urban area, showed decreased activity in a region of the brain associated with a key factor in depression.

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Crowell and her sister Teresa Ostler, a registered nurse, both had a background in health and wellness, but each struggled with their own state of well-being, which they say was mostly derived from stress.

After college, Crowell worked at the School of Urban Wilderness Survival, where she gained a passion for wilderness therapy that led her to earn a master's degree in psychology.

Crowell invested in a wellness company, but said she was looking for something more.. She was so busy as a corporate executive she was neglecting her own health.

She and Ostler began taking healthy living vacations at a resort in South Carolina. That idea, of health, fitness and well-being immersion, clicked a switch.

Crowell and Ostler launched Skyterra in the prettiest place they could find in Western North Carolina, once a luxury, gated resort, with 317 acres of mountains, woods, streams and waterfalls, with extravagantly comfy cabins, where they could use the outdoor setting to promote individualized wellness retreats.

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Participants live in cottages tucked in the woods around Lake Toxaway. (Photo: Maddy Jones/mjones@citizen-times.com)

"I wanted to do something that makes a difference in people's lives," Crowell said.

"Some people come for specialized needs, some people come here and think, 'I don't know what I need,' and realize they suffer from stress. It's a full circle approach, not just health and wellness," she said.

The retreat has had 300 guests in the past year, from across the country, and from foreign countries including England, the Dominican Republic, Canada, Scotland and Egypt, Crowell said.

It is only open to 16 guests a week. They are all ages, from all backgrounds, most are women, but men are most welcome, and each has their own private bedrooms, although residents quickly become buddies. They come to shed weight, to learn to treat themselves better, transition from cancer or from alcoholism.

To an outsider the scene of water yoga, stand-up paddle boarding, outdoor tai chi and TRX classes might look like adult summer camp. But beyond the fun, there is something deeper going on.

Learning fitness, stress management, nutrition

Participants sweat in the state-of-the-art gyms, guided by instructors in rowing, spinning, running on treadmills and working out on Pilates machines, all with soothing views of the woods.

The word "exercise" is rarely used. It can have a bad connotation, something forced and artificial, said director of operations Amber Shadwick.

Skyterra is no "Biggest Loser," where pounds are lost through humiliation, screaming trainers and vomit-inducing workouts.

The real idea is fitness to keep a body in motion, in any form of activity, the way we were before the rise of sit-down jobs, said Shadwick, leading a forest walk to a waterfall, a yoga class in an open air treehouse, or cardio classes, always encouraging.

"Our goal is to meet individuals where they are on their journey," Shadwick said. "We give each individual life skills around living a healthy and active life."

Some 60 classes are offered, including meditation, dance, strength training, water yoga, kayaking and fly-fishing. Guests choose what they want, and the layers of fat and stress start to silently peel away.

Self-care, stress management

Kate Hannon, director of integrative wellness, holds private sessions and leads group classes. In a “soul card” class one rainy day, the group sat inside – always with a view of the outside – discussing what a soul card image meant to them.

Andrea Espinosa picked a card where she saw an oceanic light-filled image.

“It might have to do with change, moving through something new,” Hannon said. “There is a lot of emphasis being placed on your head, something radiating out.”

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Skyterra attendees Andrea Espinosa, Vicki Busch, and Director of Integrated Well-Being Kate Hannon share their thoughts during a soul card activity. Each card has a different image and each woman was asked to discuss what they saw. This activity teaches participants to listen to their hearts and trust their gut, using the cards to think on a deeper level. (Photo: Maddy Jones/mjones@citizen-times.com)

“Change comes first in your head and radiates out, into a darker color. I like the idea of moving through the darkness,” Espinosa said. “What I’ve learned here most is listening to myself.”

Aside from the hiking and paddle boarding, perhaps the favorite activity at Skyterra is eating. Registered dietitian Eleni Ottalagana works with gourmet chef Casey Maness to prepare every meal.

Maness uses organic, farm fresh vegetables, whole foods, wild caught seafood, high quality meats, liberally spiced with fresh herbs instead of sugar and salt, and goat’s milk and cheese instead of dairy. The idea is to eat nourishing food, refined as little as possible, with anti-inflammatory properties, Ottalagana said.

For breakfast, plates are heaped with salad greens and avocados rather than stacked with pancakes, butter and syrup. “Greens are the new toast,” Ottalagana said.

A comfort food, low-calorie lunch consists of lobster bisque thick and creamy with a homemade cashew sauce to start, a cauliflower bisque for vegetarians, then roasted red pepper chicken salad, locally sourced, over fresh greens and other raw vegetables, and a chickpea salad alternative.

No alcohol is served, although guests can bring their own. For snacks there are plenty of fruits and nuts, but the favorite is “golden milk,” a concoction of full fat coconut milk, turmeric, black pepper, vanilla, cardamom, and other anti-inflammatory ingredients, thick and golden colored, served up like hot chocolate.

Setting fitness or other goals are not required, but many guests find them helpful. Wilson set three goals within her first week at Skyterra: fitness, self-care and nutrition.

Working with Shadwick and recreation director Ellwood Crowell, Wilson planned a one-day, 20-mile hike. When she arrived at Skyterra she couldn't walk the hilly trails and had to get around by golf cart.

"I thought it would be miserable. But I finished earlier than I expected and I wasn't hating life," she said of hiking 20 miles in the Pisgah National Forest last week. "It was one of the most personally fulfilling and enriching experiences of my life. I'm a hiker now."

A side bonus? She lost 43 pounds in nine weeks.

Her nutrition goal was to create and prepare a healthy, flavorful dinner for the guests and staff. She used one of her family's high calorie dishes – pierogis, pork and peppers - and working with the dietitian and chef, changed out the bleached, enriched flour with almond flour dough, cheddar-style goat cheese and sautéed greens instead of the cheesy, fatty mush inside regular pierogis.

Her self-care, or stress management, goal was to work through the negative thought patterns that had led Wilson to hurt and talk degradingly about herself.

She set a goal to give herself a full day of pampering in Asheville, getting a pixie haircut, dying it dark, chocolate brown, buying a new outfit and jewelry.



Dawnrae Wilson fly-fishes on the Middle Fork of the French Broad River under the guidance of recreation director Ellwood Crowell at the new Skyterra Wellness Retreat in Lake Toxaway. (Photo: Courtesy of Denman Bennett Images)

"I was very kind to myself. It was the physical representation of what we had been working on," she said.

Evaluating her life and what she wanted from life, led to another life-changing decision for Wilson. She will be changing careers to something in health and wellness, and will not be going back to Charlotte. She is moving to Asheville.

The mountain town has a healthy, active community, she said, where she can surround herself with a happy life and include her new obsessions – hiking, paddle boarding and fly-fishing.

The life-changes did not come cheaply. A week at Skyterra runs about \$3,000.

Skyterra staff have worked with Wilson's doctors to discuss her health issues moving forward, they catalogued videos of all the classes, breathing exercises and grocery shopping tips to help her transition back to the real world.

"I would have written a check for twice as much because I got my life back," Wilson said.

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