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Four men in Denver Rescue Mission's New Life Program get suited up before rafting down Brown's Canyon on the Arkansas River. Photo by Danielle Charbonneau

## Former homeless stay afloat with rafting trip

By Danielle Charbonneau  
YourHub Contributor

As the orange glow of the rising sun cut through the fog at daybreak June 14, about 40 formerly homeless men in Denver Rescue Mission's New Life rehabilitation program convened in the parking lot at The Crossing transitional housing facility.

As they loaded their backpacks and towels into group vans the anticipation was palpable. It wasn't long ago that some of them were sleeping on a city sidewalk or in the backseat of a car with only one thing on their minds: the next high.

This morning, they woke up with the anticipation of a whole new kind of high, a sober kind that comes from a once-in-a-lifetime adventure white water rafting down the Arkansas River.

For 14 years, Joe Greiner and his company, Wilderness Aware Rafting, has been donating excursions to Denver Rescue Mission. It's a win-win: Wilderness Awares' new guides get practice and the Mission guests get an opportunity to experience the rush of the rapids.

"For many of our program participants, the raft trip can be an exciting turning point as they realize that life can be fun and exciting while clean and sober," said Steve Walkup, the vice president of programs for Denver Rescue Mission. "It's also a great way for them to bond with each other, to work as a team and be out in God's beautiful world."

It's a welcomed escape for the men who spend the majority of their days at The

Crossing participating in things like work therapy, counseling and case management. Most days, the men fight against their minds and the steel grip of their addictions. On this day, the only battle was against the rapids.

So much of the experience is about teamwork and communication. As each guide calls out commands, the crew must listen and paddle in sync to make it through the intense rapids. If the crew gets out of sync, rafts can wrap around boulders, flip or get stuck.

It's similar to what the men experience on the river of recovery: setbacks, twists, turns, moments when it feels like one might drown, times when someone needs help getting back into the boat and the triumphant cheers when one makes it through a rough patch.

"There are so many metaphors that relate to life," said John Minion, a chaplain at The Crossing who came on the trip. "When we're back at home, the experience can be a great teaching tool."

But perhaps more than anything, the raft trip is just plain fun. It provides joy to people who haven't had much of it.

"I wish I could be out here every day," said a mission rafter. "I was a wreck when I got to the mission. I didn't want to live. And slowly but surely, life is getting better. Now this? Being out here on the river gives me something to look forward to. It's surreal."

Danielle Charbonneau is a public relations intern for Denver Rescue Mission.

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