



“THE OCEAN DOESN'T JUDGE”

Yvette Curtis set up a surf club for women and girls. Now, she wants to see more BAME women in the water

‘**W**hen my daughter Aliyah was 12, she was desperate to learn to surf. I’m a personal trainer, but I was incapable of teaching her that. So we looked around at local clubs and she tried a few, but she wasn’t comfortable at any of them. They were really boy heavy (as you’d expect), full of guys who were already friends, had been going a long time, and had their own equipment. We didn’t have a board and, at that age, with her going in and out of hobbies, I wasn’t going to buy one even if I could afford it. I thought, I couldn’t be the only parent who enjoys surfing but doesn’t do it well, and wants their child to learn in a nurturing and supportive environment.

‘I spoke to one of the surf schools and a few female coaches in North Devon, where we live, and explained that I wanted to set up a female-focused club. As a trainer,



you can run warm-ups and you can see the biomechanics of any sport, so I was happy to be involved, but I wanted qualified surf coaches for the club. They gave me their full support, so we decided to try it out for a season. And that first season was just insane. We had so many girls of Aliyah’s age, all starting together. So Wave Wahines was born, and it never would have happened without her.

‘*Wahines* is a Hawaiian word, which literally means female surfer. The statistics say that girls aged 9-16 tend to drop out of sport, and I’m adamant to make Wahines an environment where we can stop that happening. Body image, confidence, puberty, judgement – all of these are factors that drive girls to drop out of sport, so I made sure the club was about fun, community and friendship.

‘I had my first surf lesson as part of my “things to do before I’m 30” list. I took myself down to Newquay, fell



Yvette Curtis inspires a new generation of young female surfers

off loads, but had a great time. A decade later, I'm still no better, but I love it. Surfing feels so freeing. When I'm on the board, I feel really happy, really accomplished, and so free. It's just you, the water and nature. And sometimes your girlfriends, cheering you on. There's a really lovely feeling of community, and I want more women and girls to experience the joy that it's brought me.

SPORT OF PRINCESSES

'The ocean is the one place where you can't be judged. The sea doesn't care whether you're gay or straight, what gender you are, your ethnicity, or whether you're able-bodied or not, so neither should we. None of those things matter when you're in the sea, it's just you and mother nature. That's a really powerful place to be, and the fact that so few women have felt that is really sad.

'Historically, surfing is Hawaiian, and it was done primarily by people of colour and women – princesses surfed. But it's followed this typical pattern, and now all we know of surf culture is the white, middle-class male side. That's changing, but not as quickly as we'd like. Women are now paid equally on the World Surf League and Championship tours, which is huge. That's really helpful for this young generation of female surfers. They're seeing that it's a genuine career pathway, and not centred on wearing bikinis in sexualised Instagram marketing. Women are seeing a different way into the sport, and it's on your merit as an athlete, rather than how you look.

'I'm proud to be a woman of colour, but I'm not sure I always have been. Years ago, I was in a meeting for the Institute for Women's Surfers Europe, and I was the only woman of colour in that room. We were discussing ♦♦



Above left: taking to the waves with a class; above right: as a PT, Yvette is well placed to give advice to budding young surfers; right: it's all about making sport more fun for girls



race and ethnicity, and at the time I had just my first two daughters, both really light-skinned with blue eyes. And I remember saying to the women that actually, I was really relieved they didn't have my skin tone, because it means life is going to be that much easier for them. That was a really hard admission to make, but I genuinely felt it. And then with the birth of my third daughter, who does have my colouring, it really made my question why I felt that way. I resolved that we need to change society, rather than changing our children.

BROADENING DIVERSITY

'We need more BAME women and girls in surfing. There's a huge disparity, and I see it in our lessons. Some of that is down to geography – we don't have the greatest diversity here – but there are deeper issues in the sport, and that's where we come in. We've been granted funding from Sport England to run a programme, looking at getting more women and girls from diverse ethnic communities into the sea.

'A big motivator behind the diversity program was actually the sheer amount of racist trolling I received online. I did a piece on the lack of ethnic diversity within female surfing, and when it aired, it was pretty horrendous. I got a lot of racial abuse. It was really hard, so I stepped away from social media for a couple of days, and some really amazing female friends helped kill the comments with science and education. But for a while it made me wonder why I was bothering. Then I sat down with my dad and we spoke about it. He came over from Mauritius when he was 17, and he talked candidly about some of the abuse he'd suffered. The difference, he said, was that he couldn't say anything. But you actually have a voice, and an opportunity to fight against this. After that, I felt it would be a disservice to him, and the people

“Diverse representation is important – you can't be what you can't see”

who have gone before me, not to use what voice I have to say, no, that's not how you behave, it's not acceptable.

'Diverse representation is so important. You can't be what you can't see. Or, flip it on its head: if you can see it, you can be it. Those sound really clichéd, but they are absolutely on point. Growing up, I absolutely adored Fatima Whitbread and Tessa Sanderson – they were the athletes who I looked up to, and why I went into athletics myself. Representation is a major part of getting more women and girls of colour, from different backgrounds, of different abilities and different sexualities, into surfing. The way forward is to put people of colour in positions where they can be seen by future generations, so they know that they're welcome there too.

LOOKING FORWARD

'In North Devon, there are community partnerships working to support resettled Syrian refugees. I'm so excited, because our new funding means we've been able to work together, and soon we'll be back in the water and we'll have a wonderful new cohort of Syrian girls surfing with us. I really want to see these girls experience the joy of being on a surf board. Even if they're lying down, or just playing about in the waves – whatever makes them feel good. I just want to see more girls in the sea who looked like me when I was 10. Thirty years ago, I would not have seen that many girls of colour in the water, so it would be lovely to give that gift to the next generation. **📌** Find out more about Wave Wahines at wavewahines.co.uk or [@wave_wahines](https://www.instagram.com/wave_wahines) on Instagram.

As told to Hattie Parish. Photographs Nicole Beveridge, Jim Willeman