



Saltwater Portrait »

Jay Liesener rediscovers a love thought lost

Disability is just a barrier to overcome

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Milton's Jay Liesener is proof that life can change in an instant – for the bad and for the good.

Nearly 25 years ago, while doing backflips on a trampoline, one wrong move resulted in a broken neck and a lifetime of paralysis. Along with his ability to walk, Liesener lost one of the biggest loves of his life – surfing. Or at least he thought so.

About six years ago, his life changed again. For the first time in 19 years, Liesener was surfing again.

“When they pushed me in on that first wave and I felt the surge of the ocean just grab ahold of the board and take off toward the shore, it was just one of the greatest experiences of my life,” he said.

With the help of a team of friends and family and a modified surfboard, Liesener is able to ride waves on his stomach, shifting his weight from side to side to navigate through the surf.

Before his life-changing injury at 17 years old, Liesener was an avid surfer. His first taste of the sport came at 7 years old at Waikiki Beach while spending the summer with his family in Hawaii. He was also a competitive swimmer, spending many hours in the pool when he was only 5. When he lost the ability to swim, he lost a big part of his life.

Liesener never even imagined surfing was possible. His inspiration came in the form of a surfing documentary called “Step Into Liquid,” which highlighted the story of a surfer named Jesse Billauer, who didn't let a broken neck stop him from surfing. Fascinated by Billauer's story, Liesener tried to figure out how it was possible.

“It finally dawned on me that it wasn't necessarily something spectacular about



NICK ROTH PHOTO

Jay Liesener posed for a photo with his surfboard following a recent chat at Eagle's Nest Christian Academy in Milton.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JAY LIESENER

WITH THE HELP OF HIS TEAM, Jay Liesener is able to surf waves at Indian River Inlet and Assateague Island.

Jesse that was allowing him to do this thing that seemed impossible to me,” he said. “It was that he put a team of people together to help him. In my mind, that was a revelation.”

With a new goal set, Liesener was ready to get back in the ocean.

“It was something I realized I had to try,” he said. “I had to redefine what being a surfer meant and open myself up to being part of a team.”

He discovered an organization called Life Rolls On, which empowers paraplegics and quadriplegics to realize anything is possible. The organization's signature program, They Will Surf Again, takes disabled young people into the ocean to experience the freedom and mobility of riding a wave. The group also offers programs geared toward skating and skiing.

Through the organization, Liesener traveled to Virginia Beach, where his dream finally became a reality.

“The fear for me was, what if I got out there, and it just wasn't enjoyable or it felt like I just wasn't doing it?” he said. “That would've been devastating because it would've been like losing that part of me all over again. But I had to take the risk. It was something I just felt I had to do – to overcome these fears and participate fully in life again and not hold myself back.”

Once he rode his first wave in nearly two decades, he was hooked all over again.

“The first time a wave hit my body and the water sprayed up into my face, I just felt at home again,” he said. “Something inside of me reawakened.”

The experience was life-changing. “All the pain I feel in my body on a daily basis, all the barriers I face on land, that all just disappeared,” he said. “I was just completely in that moment and focused. I feel that every time I get in the ocean.”

When he returned from Virginia Beach, he established Team SurfGimp. With support from his friends, family and the surf community, he now surfs as often as he can at Indian River Inlet and



PHOTO COURTESY OF JAY LIESENER

Jay Liesener doesn't let his disability get in the way of his love for surfing.

Assateague Island. He uses a modified surfboard that allows him to lock in his elbows to stay on the board safely. If he wipes out, which is still about 50-50, he has his team spread about the surf to quickly pull him above water.

Through the whole experience, Liesener said, he has learned a lot about himself. The barriers he faced were of his own creation, he said, and they were preventing him from doing what he wanted in his life. Realizing he couldn't do everything on his own was one of his biggest hurdles.

“It prevented me from trying things with the help of other people because I didn't think it would be as enjoyable to do it that way,” he said.

And once he finally embraced the team aspect, he was worried he would be a burden on those helping him.

“When I first started this, one of the hard things was that it felt very selfish,” he said. “I was really asking a lot of other people in terms of their time and energy. I wasn't sure what I would be able to give back to them.”

What he eventually came to realize is that everyone was having just as much fun as he was. Ron Phillips, an administrator at Eagle's Nest Christian Academy and a member of Team SurfGimp, said Liesener has given plenty back to this team.

“Just to be able to go out and see Jay having such a good time, that just makes everybody else have a blast,” he said.

“We've gotten to live things through Jay, and that is just incredible for us.”

With his team, Liesener has tinkered with his board and other equipment to make the ride more manageable and efficient. His story inspired many in the area to join his team. One of them, Jen Booth, shared his story with renowned surf company Quicksilver, which honored Liesener as a Hero in the Spirit of Eddie Aikau. Aikau was a legendary big wave surfer who dedicated his life to keeping other people safe on the North Shore of Hawaii. Aikau died in 1978 when he attempted to paddle 12 miles to shore to get help for the crew of a capsized voyaging canoe. Quicksilver hosts an invitational in his honor, and, as a Hero, Liesener was flown to Hawaii to attend the event. While there, he met some of the biggest names in surfing, including the man who inspired him to surf again – Jesse Billauer.

“I got to share dinner with him, and thank him for inspiring me and so many other people to chase their dreams and to do things that really seem impossible,” he said.

Now, Liesener is sharing his story in hopes of inspiring others.

“We all have teams that support us – our family, friends, teachers, reverends,” he said. “They are all a part of our lives and allow us to do things that on our own would be impossible. If you open yourself up to that, you can achieve things you could never imagine.”