

# Milton surfer flows from wheelchair to waves

Liesener wins trip to be part of event in Hawaii

By Chris Flood

Delaware State News

MILTON — Jay Liesener wasn't able to take up surfing until he was in his mid-30s, but remembers being introduced to the sport at the age of 7 when he spent the majority of a summer in Hawaii because his dad was teaching a college course there.

At the time, he was living in Prince George's County, Md., and had never really been to the ocean — up until then, the family had always traveled to a nearby lake for water activities. That summer though, Mr. Liesener, now 41 and living in Milton with his wife Melanie, got a chance to ride the waves at Waikiki Beach and picked up his first surfing magazine from a local convenience store that had a bunch of big wave surfers on the pages inside.

"Gerry Lopez was on the cover. You could tell it was him because he always had a lighting bolt on his board," said Mr. Liesener with a smile thinking back on that magazine and the time spent in the tropical paradise.

More than 30 years later, Mr. Liesener will be traveling back to where his love for the waves was stoked as an invited guest for the opening ceremony of the big wave riding event called the The Quiksilver In Memory of Eddie Aikau. This is the event's 29th year and the ceremony takes place in Waimea Bay on Dec. 5.

In honor of Eddie Aikau, a big wave legend from Hawaii who died at age 32 in 1978, the event runs during the time of year — beginning of December through February — when the winds have the potential to produce huge waves. It is held only on days of historical surf conditions (35- to 40-foot waves), which happens every three or four years. The last time big wave riding was held was in December of 2009.

Mr. Liesener will be attending the event as the winner of the event's first ever Hero in the Spirit of Eddie Aikau contest. According to the event's website, 1,765 people entered and it was done as a way to find "those real life heroes who inspire us every day, just like Eddie did and continues to do."

Months since finding out about winning, Mr. Liesener still can't believe he's about to head to Hawaii. It was 9:30 at night on the day the



Submitted photo/Melanie Liesener

Milton-resident and quadriplegic Jay Liesener, aka the Surf-gimp, heads down the face of a wave on his modified surfboard while members of Team Surf-gimp spot him. Mr. Liesener, his wife, and team members will be traveling to Hawaii at the end of the month for the Quiksilver In Memory of Eddie Aikau big wave surf event. The story of his continued efforts to surf beat out more than 1,700 contest entries.

announcement was to be made and hadn't heard anything, but I checked my e-mail one last time before getting ready to go to bed, Mr. Liesener said describing how he and his wife found out about winning the trip.

"I didn't think there was much of a chance, but the e-mail was there saying we won. Mel and I just started screaming. We were calling everyone we knew," he said, adding sarcastically, "I think I cried a lot."

## The injury

The reason Mr. Liesener couldn't take up surfing is because a trampoline accident that broke his 4th and 5th cervical vertebrae left him a quadriplegic at the age of 17. He can't move from his waste down and has very limited arm movement.

"I was doing a back flip and I slowed the rotation down too much," he said. "It was one of those moments where you get up in the air and you know it's going to end bad."

Despite his injuries, and its associated surgeries and then rehab, Mr. Liesener was able to finish high school, go to college, get his master's degree and be a dissertation away from receiving a doctorate. He fell short because his body just couldn't handle the long hours needed to

complete the required case study and hold down a teaching job.

"My health began to fall apart. I needed more surgeries to undo all the damage I had done," he said. "There were a lot of low periods. That much change in a person's life can cause a lot of stress. There's an idea of what your life is going to be like and it all changes after an injury like this. But you have to attempt to find meaning in what your life has become."

It's been so long since the accident, that Mr. Liesener has trouble recalling what it feels like to be able to move without the help of a motorized wheelchair.

"Every once and a while I'll have a vivid dream where I'm walking, but even those are coming less frequently," he said. "More and more in my dreams I'm in a wheel chair. It shows that you do lose those sensations."

## Creation of Surf-gimp and the team

Mr. Liesener went 19 years before attempting to get back in the water.

At the age of 36, he and Melanie went to a Life Rolls On event. LRO is a non-profit organization that inspires others to see the possibilities beyond paralysis. The couple went to one of the organization's They Will

Surf Again events, which allows people with various stages of paralysis to be secured to a board well enough to ride a wave, but able to fall off if they crash. There are spotters lining the water, from deep to shallow, to prevent the participants from drowning.

"Just the momentum of the ocean brought so much rushing back," said Mr. Liesener of that experience.

The experience inspired Mr. Liesener to work toward being able to surf again, but whenever he wanted and not just when there was a special event happening. He bought a board and was able to have a friend modify it to match the board he had rode on before. He bought the wetsuit needed to keep his body warm because his body can't handle ocean water temperatures for very long. He figured out that fat tires on his wheelchair made the trip along the sand easier for the person pushing him to the water.

He also created the moniker Surf-gimp with a corresponding image of a person with out-stretched arms in a wheelchair on a surfboard riding a wave.

"We pretty much had that from the beginning. We had to figure out

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something to call ourselves," he said. "I thought it sounded amusing."

About a year after the LRO event, Mr. Liesener, along with a group of people who call themselves Team Surfingimp — a collection of friends and other water lovers just looking to lend a hand, went back out.

"It's something that I thought I'd never have again. That sense of freedom once I get pushed into the wave and it takes over," he said.

There are significant challenges to Mr. Liesener being able to surf. He is dependent on the team, which means if there's not enough people to go one weekend he can't go out. He can't read the morning's surf report and decide to go surfing that day. Plans are made days, if not weeks, in advance, which means if the weather doesn't cooperate it's a day of floating, or sitting in rain, or having to be cancelled all together because the waves are too big. He floats in his wetsuit, but if he falls off his board face-down he can't flip himself over.

"I've got to trust that those guys will be there, but in optimal conditions I can hold my breath for a minute, maybe a minute and a half," he said laughing.

But it's the feeling of having some control of how his body moves that keeps Mr. Liesener going. For the past five years he's been surfing off the coasts of Assateague Island and the Indian River Inlet whenever possible, which is six or seven times a year.

"It's hard for me to understand — that it has this deep meaning for these grown adults. They're standing in the water crying because of the emotional impact. Thankfully they get over that quickly," he said. "We usually attract some attention. It's definitely out of the ordinary."

For Mr. Liesener it's still an interesting feeling being on a wave.

"At that point I'm probably the most dependent on the team to help me, but I also feel the most free," he said.

## Not a hero

Jenny Booth, a Rehoboth Beach resident and friend of Mr. Liesener's for nearly 10 years, is the person who found the contest online. She's been a member of Team Surfingimp since the beginning and will be one of about a dozen team members traveling to Hawaii for the week-long trip.

"Jay is just a great guy to be around," she said. "He inspires us to want to do more. If you're having a bad day, just go see Jay and he'll make you feel better."

Mr. Liesener doesn't consider himself a hero and no matter how many different ways the question is posed, he won't take credit for being able to surf. He gives all the credit to his wife



Delaware State News/Chris Flood  
Jay and Melanie Liesener show off the modified surfboard used by Mr. Liesener to surf. The board is over nine feet long and allows for Mr. Liesener to be secured in place while riding a wave, but also to be able to fall off when the wave crashes at the end.

(who pushes the wheel chair to the water and can always be found with a camera), the members of his team, and handful of businesses and organizations in the beach area of Delaware — the local chapter of Surfrider, East of Maui, Arenas Signs, Liquid, El Dorados, Reynold's Back Door Surfboards, Surf Bagel and Logo Motive.

Without these guys none of this would happen, he said.

"At first I felt selfish asking for them to help. It's very humbling for them to take their time, energy and effort, so basically, I can get out there and play," he said. "I've learned that they're just as excited as I am about being out there. Those guys are my heroes."

Mr. Liesener hopes to continue surfing until his body "can no longer take it." And many of the people on Team Surfingimp have children watching what's going on.

"The next generation of the team is sitting there on the beach watching," he said. "People surf well into their sixties, so I've got a few years."

## Trip anticipation

Mr. Liesener won't be riding any of the potentially huge waves (an incident early in the surfing experiment that knocked him out cold taught him a quick lesson on trying to surf when waves are too big), but he's still beyond excited about the trip.

"For me, meeting these guys is like a basketball fan meeting Michael Jordan. Being out there with all those pros that I've been following for years — it's going to be amazing," he said, quickly rattling off 11-time World Champion Kelly Slater, Mr. Lopez and a host of other big

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## BIRTHS

### LILY ANNA REILLY

Michael & Kelly Reilly of Dover are overjoyed to announce the arrival of their daughter, Lily Anna Reilly.

Lily was born on October 25, 2013 at 2:52 a.m. at Kent General Hospital. She weighed 8 lb and measured 20.75 inches long.

Lily's maternal grandparents are John and Susan McColgan of Clearwater Beach, Florida.

Her paternal grandparents are Michael and Margaret Reilly of Wilmington, Delaware.



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Submitted photo

Jay Liesener, center with his wife Melanie sitting on his lap, surrounded by Team Surfchimp during a surfing trip this past summer.

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wave surfers attending the opening ceremony. "The list just never ends.

On the morning of the interview, Quicksilver had informed Mr. Liesener that he might get time with the Aikau family and chance to go surfing

with the pros in more friendly waters. They might also get a chance to attend the annual awards ceremony for the world of surfing elite that's taking place while they're there.

"It's like the Grammys for surfing," he said.

In the end though, if that stuff doesn't happen and all Mr. Liesener gets to do is participate in the open-

ing ceremony, he'll be fine. He's bringing his board along and he's going to do some surfing.

"The worst day there is better than the best day here," he said. "I want to find some two-foot waves at Waikiki and ride for a couple hundred yards."

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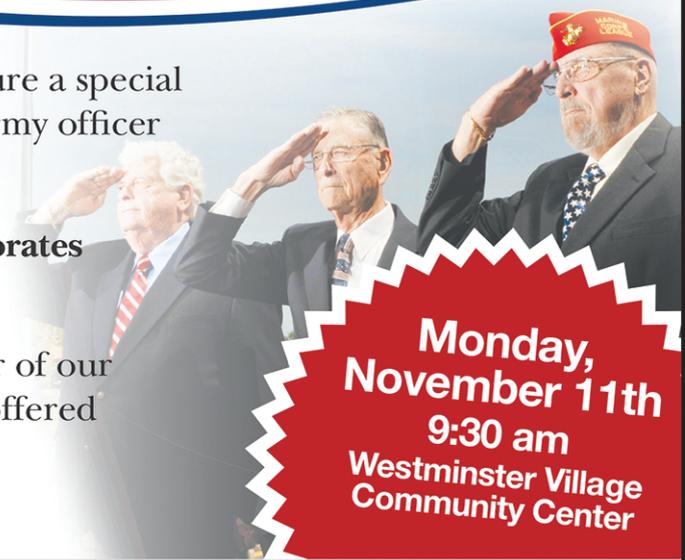


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