



Surfer draws strength from sea

With crew, every wave brings triumph

By Rob Kunzig
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There have been better days in the annals of surfing, but Jay Liesener didn't seem to mind. Strapped into his custom-built, hand-modified surfboard, he floated over small swells, chatting with the men — helpers, friends — floating beside him.

The morning was chilly, gray and curtailed by a steady downpour, but weather means little to his crew, who gathered near Indian River Inlet to help Liesener catch a wave.

When they pulled him from the water after his last wave, the skin around Liesener's left eye was starting to turn purple from where his surfboard had smacked him after a wipeout.

"Thanks, guys," he said between deep breaths, looking at the scrum of wetsuited people gathered around him. "It's an honor."

Liesener was the only surfer for miles along the shore. A steady downpour fell on a mostly flat sea. These weren't choice conditions, but he doesn't have much of a choice: he's paralyzed from the waist down, and only has partial motion in his upper body. It takes a village to get him on a wave, and when his crew has free time, he can't turn it down.

The team started toward the cars, pushing Liesener along the sidewalk that goes under the bridge. Early-morning fishermen turned away from their lines to catch a glimpse of the surfer, sand still stuck to the knees of his wetsuit, and his steed, a swarthy 9-foot board originally intended for stand-up paddling, carried by a helper behind him.

"If we can figure out a way to do it with fewer people, it would make it easier," Liesener, 38, had said days earlier, relaxing in his Milton home. When not in a wetsuit, Liesener wears jeans and a T-shirt, the scales of a tattooed fish barely visible on his right bicep. His black hair is cropped close to his skull. His warm brown eyes and soft voice are instantly calming, the kind of comfort you might expect from a counselor — which he was.

Liesener holds an undergraduate degree in psychology, a master of arts in rehabilitation counseling and was on the brink of finishing a doctorate in counseling instruction.

But his health failed on him. Pulling long hours teaching at Norfolk State University as he pursued his degree was taking its toll; after two years of being in and out of the hospital, he had to give up his doctoral ambitions. If he had gotten it, he said, he would want to use it, and his reality wasn't going to allow that. He appears to take that disappointment in stride. Learning to adapt to changing life circumstances has been life since he was a teenager and broke his neck.

The accident

Liesener was about to begin his last year at St. Andrew's Episcopal School in Bethesda, Md. Enjoying the last days of summer vacation, he was bouncing on a trampoline in a friend's back yard, killing

Saltwater Portrait »

time before a night out. He was a gifted athlete — he played basketball, soccer, lacrosse and swam competitively. A former diver, Jay thought he'd do a back flip and try to slow the rotation.

"I slowed it down too much," he said. Jay came down on his head, crushing the fourth and fifth vertebrae in his cervical spine. There was no pain, he said, because he couldn't feel anything. His nerves were shattered, numbing his entire body. He lay on his back, staring at the sky, until paramedics arrived. "It freaked me out," he said. "But at least it wasn't painful."

He was flown to a Baltimore shock trauma center, and the next few days were a blur. He lost the ability to breathe, forcing doctors to open a hole in his throat. He spent 89 days in bed, unable to move or speak. He took visitors for one hour, twice a day.

Talking about it, his brown eyes go dark. "It was horrible," he said. "You just try not to go nuts." To some extent, he said, that meant not caring — giving up, accepting his fate.

He traveled to Craig Hospital in Denver, a renowned rehabilitation center, where he started to regain feeling in his upper body. Specialists suspended his arms, exercising the muscles without the strain of gravity. Slowly but surely, he regained some motion.

"You start getting some hope back," he said, "compared to when you're isolated and you have no clue what your future will be."

A staff teacher helped Liesener keep up with his studies in between exercise and rehabilitation sessions. When he returned home, he was able to move his arms and head, but his lower body was dead, and he still fatigued easily. The credits he earned at Craig let him take half days for his last year at St. Andrew's.

Studying psychology at the University of Maryland, where his father taught, was a rush — it felt good to have some control again, he said. He furthered his studies in a master's program, where he met his wife, Melanie. Getting hired at Norfolk State halted work on his doctoral dissertation, but that was acceptable. He was working, teaching others, making a difference.

Still, long hours spent grading papers and planning lessons for a full course load took their toll, nearly bending his spine into a C. There were open sores where the wheelchair restraints that held him upright chafed at his ribcage. He said he was probably close to dying from sepsis when he finally crashed and went to the hospital.

"They pumped me full of antibiotics I'd never heard of," he said. For two years he bounced between home and a hospital bed, never healthy enough to resume teaching. Reluctantly, he resigned from his teaching post. He moved to Milton with Melanie and started figuring out how to reconcile himself with the fact that he probably wouldn't ever teach again. It's been a journey, figuring out how to be OK with not working when you're in your 30s."



ROB KUNZIG PHOTOS

JAY LIESENER SURFS A WAVE near Indian River Inlet. A small crew of friends helped launch him onto waves and picked him up when he reached shore. Shown in back are (l-r) Adam Land, Jack Frederick and Jack Powell. In front are Ed Martin, Jeff Land, Liesener and Jamison Young.

Stepping into liquid

It never occurred to Liesener that quadriplegics could surf until he watched Jesse Billauer do it. Watching the surfing documentary "Step Into Liquid," Liesener saw Billauer cut across waves on an augmented board, his elbows fastened with straps.

"When I saw it, it just sort of clicked," Liesener said. "It was possible."

Billauer heads up Life Rolls On, a non-profit organization dedicated to getting spinal-cord injury victims back in the surf. Browsing the website, Liesener saw there was an event scheduled for Virginia Beach. He talked it over with Melanie. There was a huge chance he could reinjure himself, yes, but it seemed worth the risk.

At Virginia Beach, the first time Liesener surfed, Life Rolls On had 20 volunteers for each participant. They strapped Liesener onto his board, pulled him out to the breakers and waited for a wave.

"Just being back in the water was amazing," he said. The cool Atlantic waters swirled around his wetsuit, pressing it close to his skin. When a set of swells rolled in, it only took a nudge. He swept down the wave and rushed toward the shore, where volunteers were waiting to catch him.

"It's amazing, that first wave," he said. "The adrenaline rush." In learning how to surf, Liesener learned another valuable skill — how to wipe out. For most surfers, getting slammed by a wave means a few panicked seconds of thrashing around in foam. But Liesener can't thrash. He holds his breath and trusts in the volunteers.

Getting the right fit

The board he used at Virginia Beach was serviceable, but it was an imperfect fit — he fell off on nearly every ride. He needed his own board.

A good friend and veteran surfer, Pat Smith, took him to East of Maui surf shop in Dewey Beach. Assistant manager Jamison Young said they were looking for something beefier than your average board — wider, stronger. They ended up choosing a board from Channel Islands, the company that made Billauer's board. When it arrived, it seemed too narrow, and a quick test drive in Rehoboth Bay confirmed their fears: The board was too unstable, and Liesener was unable to stay on, even in calm waters.

The next board fit his needs precisely —

9 feet long, 26 inches wide and 3 inches thick.

"It's a beast," Liesener said proudly. "But it turns really nice. It's fast."

By the time he went to a Life Rolls On event at Rockaway Beach, N.Y., the board had been honed and tricked out to meet his specifications. Two fins keep his ankles secured, while a foam ramp protects his chest and keeps his head up. The board can hang from the roof of his modified van.

He had a nasty wipeout at Rockaway, one that didn't let him catch his breath before tossing him off the wave. Floating face down, he tried to remain calm and keep himself from choking on salt water.

"I told myself, they're going to get here, even if I pass out," he said. But he didn't pass out. The Life Rolls On workers fished him from the foam, gave him a few minutes to breathe and got him back on the board.

"It's worth it," he said. "Going out, having fun. Being able to play again." At Indian Beach, Liesener was able to surf the few swells that came to him. With the velocity gained from a strong shove, he tried shifting his weight to cut across the wave before it broke. He seemed focused, intent, his face a mask of concentration as the swells carried him to shore.

He got tossed more than a few times, closing his eyes against the salty spray while helpers scrambled to hoist him out of the foam. It didn't take long to secure his elbows and wrists alongside the foam mount. In a few seconds, he was ready for the next wave.

While logistically complicated, Liesener said his sessions foster a warming sense of camaraderie. It's why he drives hours for Life Rolls On events; it's why nine people, some strangers, came together on a rainy morning to help him surf.

"The connection you feel out there is a bit overwhelming," Liesener said. "And very humbling."

Learning to be OK

Despite his academic laurels, Liesener wasn't a strong student in high school. Art was his best subject. Now that he can't grade papers into the early morning hours, he said, he's getting back to drawing.

The bumper sticker on the back of his van — a wheelchair-bound man riding a

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God's great grace and mercy were with him always. He often spoke of his life likened to the words of the song "Amazing Grace." Through the love and support of the faith community at Mary Mother of Peace Parish in Millsboro, he and his wife became eucharistic ministers. His love for God, family, children and grandchildren, fine food and friends will remain with loved ones as cherished memories forever.

He was the son of the late Francis Romeo and Mary (Constantine) Romeo. He is survived by his wife of 16 years, Paula (Redmond) Romeo; his sister, Maryann Bende; nephew, Steven; and great-niece, Kate Bende. He is also survived by his stepchildren, whom he loved as his own, Denise Strengari, Bobby Hayes (Stephanie) and Sherri Licht (John); nine grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

A Mass of Christian Burial will be held at 1 p.m., Tuesday, Sept. 21, at St. Catherine of Siena Church, 2503 Centerville Rd., Wilmington. Burial will be pri-

vate.

In lieu of flowers, the family suggests contributions to Ashley's Friends, c/o American Heart Association, 200 Continental Dr., Suite 101, Newark, DE 19713.

Marie S. Keller, Sussex homemaker

Marie S. Keller, 84, of Oyster Rocks Road, Milton, passed away at her home Saturday, Sept. 4, 2010.

Mrs. Keller was born in Lewes at Beebe Hospital, and as a result was given the distinction of being known as a "Beebe Baby." She was the daughter of the late Roy D. and Carrie (Warrington) Simpler. Mrs. Keller was a homemaker and a member of White's Chapel United Methodist Church, Milton. She was a volunteer for 35 years at the information desk and gift shop at Beebe Medical Center. She loved gardening and flowers.

In addition to her parents, Mrs. Keller was preceded in death by two brothers, Leroy Coard Simpler and Linwood Simpler; and a sister, Irma Street. She is survived by her husband of 53 years, Moreau A. Keller Jr.;

her children: Karen Price Myers of Lutherville, Md., Kimberly D. Croy of Milton, and a stepdaughter, Donna Keller Goldsough of Ocean View; six grandchildren: Jonathan and Timothy Myers, Christine Myers Parker; Janna, Rebecca and Leah Croy; and one great-grandson, Luke Raymond Parker, born Sept. 1, 2010.

A memorial service will be held at 11 a.m., Saturday, Sept. 25, at White's Chapel United Methodist Church, 15357 Coastal Highway, Milton. In lieu of flowers, memorial contributions may be made to Delaware Hospice, 100 Patriots Way, Milford, DE 19963. Arrangements are being handled by Short Funeral Services, 416 Federal St., Milton.

James A. Hahs, enjoyed photography

James A. Hahs, 69, of West Grove, Pa., formerly of Lewes, passed away peacefully Wednesday, Sept. 15, 2010, at Churchman Village in Newark. He was born in Camden, N.J., Dec. 25, 1940, son of the late James Andrew Hahs Jr. and Kathleen Ashton Hahs.

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Surfer

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wave, with the words "Surf Gimp" scrolling out below him - was his own design.

He works with Literary Education Assistance Pups (LEAP), a program that uses dogs to encourage reading. He would often bring his black lab, Teddy, to schools and libraries. A trained service dog that picked up dropped pens and opened doors for Liesener, Teddy also listens patiently as LEAP children read to him.

Liesener said people often praise his resilience, his strength. He smiles and takes it graciously, but he doesn't see his existence as heroic. Life dictates its terms;

Liesener said he has no choice but to accept them.

He said he knows disabled people who have shut down completely, crippled in body and soul. It's sometimes tempting to wallow in your disability, Liesener said, but it's crucial to seize upon the big things: Going to college. Working. Finding love. Things that dwarf his disability in importance.

"There is no normal," he said. "And it's freeing when you have those moments when you're OK with yourself."

Wheeling back to his van, Liesener seemed more than OK with himself. He was wet and shivering, but smiling. As his wheelchair rose into the car on a powered lift, he seemed happy, proud, and humbled by the happy, proud people surrounding

him.

"I think most people have more strength than they realize," he said. "Life really isn't that horrible."

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