

**NEWS**

# In paralyzed surfer's wake, foundation hopes to support more athletes

**Adam Duvernay** The News Journal

Published 7:30 p.m. ET Jun. 3, 2018

To honor the legacy of a Delaware surfer who defied the odds, his friends — the ones who got him back on top of the waves — are working to help other athletes do the same.

Jay Liesener died last year, but he left behind the group of locals and surf enthusiasts who put the paralyzed man back on his board. On Sunday, the coalition known as Team SurfGimp, held its first fundraiser for their new charitable foundation.

After boiling up about 600 pounds of Louisiana crawfish at Cape Henlopen State Park, restaurateurs from Po' Boys Creole & Fresh Catch and 200 supporters feasted. All the day's proceeds supported Team SurfGimp Charitable Foundation for adaptive athletes, those who still want to ride and surf and swim and race despite disabilities.

The event sold out at \$40 a head for adults, and that money, along with donations collected since the foundation formed in December, will be put to work paying for the travel and equipment of athletes applying for the charity's grants.

"Jay knew his time was limited," said Foundation Board Member Jack Frederick, a surfer and a longtime member of Team SurfGimp. "He was really compassionate, and he was really an absolute pioneer in being an adaptive athlete. He was just trying to make things better for people following him. There are so many challenges in his condition."

Liesener broke his neck at 17, which made living his passion for surfing impossible. It was almost 20 years later that Liesener found an organization called Life Rolls On and its program They Will Surf Again, and he rode waves again at Virginia Beach.

He returned home to Milton and established Team SurfGimp, who became the logistical and life-saving parts of his new surf adventures. By the time Liesener died, the team consisted of between 80-100 people dedicated to putting their friend in the water.

"Whatever we could do to help Jay get in the water, we would be there," Frederick said. "We consider ourselves a sand family, but it grew bigger and bigger every season."

That meant getting Liesener to the beach and onto a modified surfboard, and then making sure to get him to safety when he wiped out, Frederick said.

"By the last three or four seasons, it was every weekend," Frederick said. "The water is therapeutic. That's where we go to get our therapy and our freedom. And for him that's what it was all about — getting out of that chair and getting on the board."

Team SurfGimp members Melissa and Mike Clampitt were family friends with Liesener and his wife, and said he often ate at their restaurant, Po' Boys Creole & Fresh Catch.

They'd always wanted to host an authentic Louisiana crawfish boil, something costly and logistically challenging because it required shipping live crustaceans from the Bayou State. So when the Foundation started up, the restaurateurs saw their chance to make it count.

"There's a lot of people who've never heard of him before," said Melissa Clampitt. "It's bringing awareness that this foundation is out there, which is what we really wanted,"

The crawfish boil was billed as the "first annual," and the Clampitts want to support the Foundation as it grows and begins to carry out its mission. Having seen the effect their efforts had on Liesener, friends hope his legacy will give that to someone else.

"He, as a person, was very inspirational to a lot of people," Mike Clampitt said.

To support the Foundation, visit their website or mail checks to Team SurfGimp Charitable Organization, PO Box 5153 Arlington, VA, 22205.

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