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NEWS

Message in a bottle memorializes quadriplegic surfer

Carol Vaughn The Daily Times

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Ecotour guide Meriwether Payne was among people working to secure the old Coast Guard station on Cedar Island last Tuesday, ahead of Hurricane Florence's forecast arrival on the East Coast.

That was when she made an unusual find on the Virginia barrier island beach — a corked amber bottle with a message inside that pays tribute to a surfer who overcame incredible odds to pursue the sport.

Payne found the bottle on the north end of Cedar Island, along with a mysterious bone of unknown origin.

Billy Crockett, who also was among those working to secure the building, found another, nearly identical bottle the same day.

Payne has found many interesting items over the years during trips to the barrier islands, including pleasure trips and work trips with her business, Seaside Ecotours. Cedar Island, in particular, seems to be a trove.

"I have some serious beach junk," Payne said.

She has at her home in Locustville dozens of fossils and other items found on the islands — including a mastodon tooth, a Native American axe head and fossilized crabs, among other items — along with a large collection of lightning whelk shells.

"The Indians thought they were good luck," she said of the shells.

She has even found a couple of bottles containing messages before — one she found more than a decade ago contained a pages-long rant written by a woman about her ex-boyfriend.

Still, the bottle Payne found on Sept. 11 contained a different sort of message.

After returning to the mainland, it took Payne a while to get at the paper curled up inside the bottle — ultimately, she had to break the bottle to get to its contents.

Once she did, she found a message memorializing quadriplegic surfer Jay Liesener and giving a link to the website of the Team SurfGimp Charitable Foundation.

Liesener, of Milton, Delaware, died at age 45 on Nov. 27, 2017.

The message asks bottle finders to send a photograph of their discovery and where they found the bottle, and it gives the Facebook page and website of Team SurfGimp and of the foundation.

On the reverse side, the paper inside the bottle had a handwritten message to Liesener: "To Jay - U ment so much for the short time I knew you. U changed my life to think anything is possible. Ride on."

The paper did not say where or when the bottles were released, but John Doerfler of Milton, Delaware, who organized the bottle project, shed light on the matter.

Doerfler organized a message-writing event during a celebration of life held for Liesener on Jan. 14 at the Rusty Rudder in Dewey Beach, Delaware. Between 200 and 300 people attended the celebration, he said.

The message-writing at the celebration was mainly done by children, he said.

"The activity was mostly for the kids, so the kids could make a drawing, kind of talking about either Team SurfGimp or Jay and what he meant to them, because the whole team and organization is ... really a family of just all kinds of generations of people — and kids are a big part of what we do ... We had a whole table for crayons and crafts, and kids put all kinds of different messages — even the parents got in on it."

Each message was put into a corked bottle.

Still, not wanting to go to sea during the winter, Doerfler held onto the messages for a while.

It was in mid-July when he and others who knew Liesener finally took around 75 bottles — each containing a message in Liesener's memory — out on a boat, releasing them about 10 miles out from Indian River Inlet.

"The whole idea was to share the good vibes, you know, to share the stoke — and hopefully, somebody will pick it up ... and put a smile on their face and get involved — add to the story of how many lives one good human being can really affect," Doerfler said.

Payne's and Crockett's finds are only the second and third of the bottles reported found — and the first ones found washed up on land.

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Another bottle was found earlier this month in the Baltimore Canyon, an area in the Atlantic Ocean about 62 miles east southeast from Indian River Inlet, according to a post on the group's Facebook page.

Liesener was a multi-sport athlete who loved to swim and play in the ocean before he broke his neck on a trampoline at age 17, leaving him a quadriplegic, according to the foundation website.

Nevertheless, he went on to earn a master's degree from the University of Maryland and taught at Norfolk State University for a time, until the demands of work became too much for his physical state.

He also married his college sweetheart Melanie.

Inspired by quadriplegic surfer Jesse Billauer, a pioneer in adaptive surfing, Liesener almost two decades after he had broken his neck founded an organization called Life Rolls On, and its program They Will Surf Again, and he rode the waves again at Virginia Beach, Virginia.

BACKGROUND Special team helps disabled surfer ride again

It took special equipment and a team of people to get Liesener out on a surfboard, and that support team — dubbed Team SurfGimp — became the basis for the SurfGimp Foundation, created in November 2017 to provide grants for people with disabilities "who want to experience their dreams the way Jay was able to experience his," according to the website.

By the time Liesener died, the team consisted of between 80 and 100 people dedicated to putting their friend in the water.

“I eventually realized that the real barrier that I had to overcome was my belief that I had to surf on my own, that it wasn't real if I couldn't do it independently,” Liesener said in a 2014 interview. “I was blind to the ways that we are all interdependent on each other. Coming to terms with this is what has made this possible.”

Donations to the Team SurfGimp Foundation can be mailed to:

Team SurfGimp Charitable Organization

PO Box 5153

Arlington, VA 22205

or online at <https://teamsurfgimpfoundation.org/donate>

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