



FAR LEFT: The Jones family, of Milton, from left, Stacey, Molly Ann, and Justin, cross over the dune onto the beach at the Indian River Inlet with the all-terrain wheelchair provided to them by the Surfjimp Foundation.

CENTER: Surfjimp Foundation volunteers gather around Jay Liesener as he prepares to ride the waves on an adapted surfboard during one of many outings facilitated by the foundation throughout the year.

LEFT: Jay Liesener skillfully rides a wave on a day of perfect breaks along the beach at the Indian River Inlet.

BELOW LEFT: Jay and Melanie Liesener founded the Surfjimp organization to help people with physical challenges enjoy outdoor activities.

SURFJIMP FOUNDATION

Riding a Wave of Generosity

Heather Markham is highly accomplished, with two master's degrees, a recently published autobiography, athletic awards for adaptive surfing, and years of professional success in fostering independence for people who are disabled. Yet one of her most treasured experiences happened in the summer of 2019 when she took to the waves on a surfboard made famous by the late Jay Liesener, a Milton resident who created the Surfjimp Foundation.

As she puts it: "I've had muscular dystrophy for 30 years — which means I can't stand or walk. To get to the beach I need two people to help me into a beach wheelchair, some additional help getting into a wetsuit and then people to set me up on the board. Then it's multiple people pivoting and turning all at the same time so you end up face-down and in the right position."

The successful rides that ensue whenever she surfs are driven by skill and characterized by the joy of movement through the water.

"Getting that weight distribution is critical; you need a strong level of body awareness," Heather says. "... But by driving my elbow into the rail, I can shift my weight and stay in the pocket and go down the line. One of the most beautiful things about it is the freedom."

That freedom was enhanced by the board that Jay had adapted to meet his own needs in 2007, several years after a trampoline accident that left him paralyzed from the neck



down. For the next decade, with help from his wife and hundreds of volunteers in the Cape region and elsewhere, he continued to surf until his health failed.

Passing the beloved board on to Heather was a fitting tribute, Melanie Liesener says, given her longstanding friendship with the Lieseners and their shared dedication to creating opportunities for others facing physical challenges.

"Jay felt so free in the water," Melanie says. "He wanted people to have the kinds of experiences he had, thanks to all of the people in the Cape community — who we called 'Team Surfjimp' — who volunteered to make it possible. Our effort to create the Surfjimp Foundation was approved the week before he died."

In the three years since his November 2017 death, the Surfjimp Foundation has awarded 34 grants to help individuals deal with such expenses as equipment modifications, accessible rental vans, wheelchairs, travel costs and other supports that make it possible to participate in a variety of athletic activities. In 2019, for example, grants enabled one recipient to compete in the Hawaii Adaptive Surfing Championships, another to learn how to surf using a kite board, and 5-year-old Molly Ann Jones, of the Milton-area, to buy an all-terrain wheelchair that takes her from Delmarva's forests to its beaches.

Melanie admits that running that foundation takes a great deal of time on top of her full-time teaching position with the

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Sussex Consortium, a school that enables students with special needs to succeed academically. Yet she insists there's no better way to honor the life of her husband, who held a master of arts in rehabilitation counseling and taught at Norfolk State University while pursuing a doctorate in counseling instruction.


"We met on the first day of graduate school at the University of Maryland and were together for 21 years before he died. He had an infectious personality. ... He was a daredevil, thrill-seeker and barrier-breaker."

She cites her husband's relentless optimism despite his struggles, and shares a few of the thoughts he expressed the last year of his life. In an essay titled "Service Talk," Jay wrote:

"I realized that no one achieves anything alone. Life is a team sport. This allows us to chase our dreams, to achieve things that appear impossible, and to be part of something bigger than ourselves. To have a meaningful life, find something you are passionate about, surround yourself with people who share that passion and chase your dreams together."

"It doesn't matter whether you succeed or fall short. The meaning comes from the effort and the relationships you form along the way. Reclaiming my dreams and finding my team has given so much meaning to my life. I hope our story challenges you to pursue your dreams and join others in the pursuit of theirs." ■

— Chris Beakey

 **ONLINE** To donate to the Surfjimp Foundation or apply for grants, visit teamsurfjimpfoundation.org.

COMIC VIEW



"I just got a 'You're out too far' text from the lifeguard."