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Ocean opens to all with director's help

Dozens of disabled people enjoy water activities thanks to Cary Troy Short's efforts

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Under Cara Troy Short's direction, a band of volunteers assembles on Oahu beaches a few times a month or more to create, as the AccesSurf slogan promises, "an ocean of possibilities" for those who would not normally have a chance to take part in water sports.

"It's a fun day for the 60 to 80 participants at our monthly Day at the Beach," Short said. "People almost always meet new friends and everyone socializes. For many it's a way for

them to reset."

The Day at the Beach is usually held at Kalaeloa's White Plains Beach on the first Saturday morning of every month. But there are many other parts of AccesSurf, including a Wounded Warrior Day at the Beach (third Wednesday of every month) for military personnel, a Paralympic Sports Club, clinics and other events.

Tailored for anyone with a physical or cognitive disability, the nonprofit offers assisted swimming and tandem surfing with an experienced volunteer as well as a chance to learn adaptive surfing, wave-skiing, kayaking, stand-up paddling or prone paddling. One of the goals is for participants to become independent in the activities, although that is not possible for everyone in the program.

Short, who is AccesSurf's executive director, coordinates everything from setting up and taking down the tents at the events to transporting the equipment, fundraising, training volunteers and assisting in the water.

Melanie Chun, a participant, sums up what Short means to the program: "She is to AccesSurf what the ocean is to Hawaii."

So, aside from a love for the outdoors, the ocean, surfing and an obvious willingness to help others, what is it that inspires Short's efforts?

One story Short likes to tell essentially answers the question.

"I remember watching a severely disabled person being helped into the water with eight people taking care of her. ... I'll always remember the tenderness of that moment," she said. "All those people working so that person could get the feeling of the ocean. I just cried."

Since then, Short has cried happy tears countless times while helping AccesSurf participants. "We cry at least once every event," she said. "It's emotional."

For one participant, a first and only outing was significant.

In that case, the son of an elderly participant who died recently asked AccesSurf to honor his mother with a ceremonial paddle-out with the scattering of lei. The woman had attended just one Day at the Beach and made it as far as the water's edge. "She loved it so much and that one time meant so much to her," Short said.

Short also relayed a story about a military veteran suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, who at first didn't want to go in the water because he was constantly hearing a noise in his head. When he finally went out in the water with a volunteer, he was asked, "What do you hear now?" He answered, "Nothing." In response, the volunteer at the veteran's side said, "That's surfing."

Short added, "That, to me, sums it all up."

Among the AccesSurf participants Short works closely with are Ann Yoshida and Zach Tapeç, both of whom now move with independence in the water.

Yoshida, a paraplegic, was a surfer before her injury and got back into the water via AccesSurf about eight years ago. Now, she's training in kayaks and canoes for the 2016 Paralympics in Rio de Janeiro.

Tapeç is one of many adaptive surfers — some of the adaptations of the boards include a carved-out middle so the head of a surfer who cannot arch his back will be in the up position, handles on the side, and a jelly pad to protect the chin.

"Zach is really working hard on getting out there and doing it independently," Short said. "And he's really doing well. I go out with him a lot, but I can't always be there and he is always eager to go. He's been doing it less than a year. One time, he got to Waikiki and some of the beachboys there recognized him and took the time to help him out. He was surfing completely on his own and the other guys in the water were all yelling, 'Let the brother get this wave.' That was a lot of aloha."

Short also has heard from a relative of one of AccesSurf's autistic participants who said the child "started to talk" after a session.

Despite such success, AccesSurf is grappling with two matters.

"We need funding and more volunteers," Short said.

"People are surprised when I tell them, but we do not have many companies in the business community helping us out. No big-name companies. We could really use one."

Short also said AccesSurf doesn't have any pitchmen or much help from professional surfing circles, although the late Buttons Kaluhiokalani, a Hawaii surf legend, contributed his time and effort to the cause.

And although there are hundreds of AccesSurf volunteers throughout the year who Short describes as "beyond spectacular," it is a struggle to organize all the "zillion things that have to happen" for the events to occur, and so more volunteers are needed.

Short started with AccesSurf as a volunteer under founder and former director Mark Marble, and for a time

was the only paid employee until a part-time assistant was hired recently. "Many who do it are instantly hooked. I've never known any volunteers who weren't touched by their experience."

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