

Volume 1, Issue 8

August 2010



BECOMING YOUR BEST

Stories Of Hope And Encouragement About Individuals With Disabilities

Becoming Your Best Newsletter

This month we are very excited to share about an event that took place here in our own local community. It was an event sponsored by The Autism Society of North Carolina, the Outer Banks (OBX) chapter.

This event was truly a community supported event. The story within this newsletter will present the details but the event could not have happened without the help of many wonderful people and businesses.

As you will read in the newsletter, this event was made possible by the efforts of two tremendous individuals—Eileen Lowery and Mark Slagle. Eileen is the president of the OBX chapter of The Autism Society of N.C. and Mark is a local surfer. These two individuals had all the connections and resources to make this event a great success.

Many local surfers, some of whom are nationally and internationally known, contributed their time and efforts including East Coast Legend, Bob Holland. To each of them we all say, "thank you!" Additionally, many folks from the local school system (Dare County Schools) and other volunteers contributed their time and efforts as well.

I had the privilege of participating and taking pictures, some of which appear in this newsletter. You can see more pictures by going to our Facebook page at Becoming Your Best on Facebook. Additionally, you can see wonderful professionally shot pictures taken by Bob Sumners by going to his website at www.shootthebeach.com.

It was an awesome day for all those who participated. Everyone gained from this experience. Everyone involved is excitedly looking forward to the next annual "Surfing for Autism" event to take place here on the Outer Banks of North Carolina. You can find out more information about future events and activities by going to www.surfingforautism.com or to their Facebook page at Autism Society of NC OBX Chapter.

Send your Inspiring stories to: stories@becomingyourbest.com.

Subscribe to our FREE newsletter—e-mail: newsletter@becomingyourbest.com

The photograph is by Bob Sumners—see more at www.shootthebeach.com.

[WE ARE NOW ON FACEBOOK—BECOME A FAN AT BECOMING YOUR BEST.](#)

Mission:

We are dedicated to presenting inspiring stories of hope and encouragement about individuals with disabilities.

These stories of success are meant to provide support and the keys to "Becoming Your Best!"

Thank you for your stories and your support!

George M. Graham Jr.

“SURFING FOR AUTISM” WRITTEN BY GEORGE M. GRAHAM JR (BASED ON INFORMATION PROVIDED BY EILEEN LOWERY AND MARK SLAGLE)

What happens when you get a bunch of surfer "dudes" and "dudettes" together with a group of children who have been diagnosed on the autism spectrum? You have a "totally awesome day" of learning and fun, dude!

That is exactly what happened on Saturday, August 14th in south Nags Head, on the Outer Banks (OBX) of North Carolina. "Surfing for Autism" was organized by the OBX Chapter of The Autism Society of N.C. with the support of many local businesses and volunteers. It was the first event of its kind to ever occur on the Outer Banks.

The event came about as a result of two people - Eileen Lowery and Mark Slagle. Eileen and Mark come from different backgrounds. Each of them has completely different stories, but they both share a couple of things in common. The first thing is they both have a "heart" and a passion for making a difference in the lives of children with special needs. The other thing is the desire to use surfing as a way to connect and reach some of these children who are on the autism spectrum.

Eileen Lowery, who is the president of the OBX Chapter of The Autism Society of N.C., had been working with members of the local chapter to put together a walk/run to help promote Autism Awareness. Eileen said, "Something just kept tugging on my heart. It just seemed like we could do more by using the resources we have on this amazing island. I wanted to do something different than the norm across the state. What I REALLY wanted to do was to get our kids with autism connected with surfers and have our children have an opportunity to have a day of surfing."

Little did Eileen know, there was someone else who had been thinking about some very similar things. That someone else was local surfer Mark Slagle. As often will happen, a series of circumstances led both of them to the right people, at the right time, to make a connection.

Mark's wife, Cyndi had been working in a class for special needs children with Dare County Schools. Mark, who also plays the guitar, would often go and play music with the class. "We had an awesome time singing and laughing. Before you knew it, the teacher and Cyndi had handed out instruments and we had a full-on band. Just being around the kids really made me feel like any problems I had were washed away," Mark said.

Mark had the idea of getting the kids into the water through surfing. Mark said, "The thought stayed with me and I really felt strong about it. Surfing has given me so much. I have gotten to travel, experience different cultures, meet awesome people and become friends with some amazing surfers. I really felt like I could give back through something that I loved - surfing."



Eileen Lowery (left), president of The Autism Society of N.C., OBX Chapter and Mark Slagle (right), local



Picture 1 (L to R): Allen Presgraves, Dylan Wolff (student), and Winfield Bevins. Picture 2 (L to R): Chris Smith, student, and John McDanel. Picture 3 (L to R): Kim Diggs, Zoey Dixon (student), and Whitney Hines (blond hair). All photos taken by George M. Graham Jr.

"SURFING FOR AUTISM"... CONTINUED

Eileen and Mark had a friend in common - Susan Watson (E.C. Preschool Coordinator with Dare County Schools) who found out, through a conversation with Eileen, about the idea of getting surfers connected with children with autism. Susan spoke to Cyndi Slagle (Mark's wife) about the conversation with Eileen. Cyndi responded that Mark had just mentioned the night before how he wanted to get surfers connected with kids with disabilities. Susan helped to make the connection happen between Eileen and Mark.

"About a week later Eileen and I talked on the phone. We decided to meet at a local coffee shop. It was really cool to share our stories," Mark said. "She asked if I thought we could make this happen. I told her the Outer Banks has the best waves on the East Coast and the best surfers. It would be a shame if we couldn't."

Eileen and Mark pulled together their resources and things began to happen. Eileen said, "It was amazing how smoothly everything came together, and the excitement from the community about this plan was even more encouraging." Both Eileen and Mark felt it was important to involve people who were really good with kids.

Eileen said, "While this was going to be a surfing event, we also felt it was important to understand the needs of our children with autism and to provide for those needs." In order to meet some of the sensory needs for the children, obstacle courses, water play, spinning toys, toys that lit up, stress balls, fans and more were provided as outlets, as well as a Retreat Tent for kids to retreat to if they needed to get away from the stimulation of the beach and activities.

Eileen added, "We decided a four person team would be best. Each child would be provided two surfers and a skilled worker who had a strong understanding about autism. Understanding that our skilled autism workers (Exceptional Children Teachers, Speech and Language Therapists, and Occupational Therapists) were obviously going to be amazing with our children, everyone, however, was in awe of how amazing the surfers were with our children on the spectrum."

"The way the surfers, skilled workers, and volunteers all came together was amazing," Mark said. "We had so many awesome people in our community who donated surfboards, food, etc. We were really blessed. I don't know who was smiling more, the kids or the volunteers. I will remember that day as long as I live."

Eileen's daughter, Savannah, went running in the opposite direction after learning her surfer was not a girl. Her surfer was internationally known surfer - Noah Snyder. Eileen said, "After her father, Trip Lowery, begged her to come back to surf with this AMAZING surfer (and that he would personally LOVE to trade places with her at that very moment), Savannah returned to only hide behind her dad's legs. It was at this point Noah dropped to the ground on his knees and hid behind the other surfer, playing with Savannah. Immediately, this brought Savannah out, engaging with everyone to then run and find a pink surfboard and begin surfing."



Picture 1 (L to R): Ben Trail, Savannah Lowery (student), and Noah Snyder. Picture 2 (L to R): Steve Wise, Matthew Cabana (student), and surfer. Picture 3 (L to R): Jake Slagle (student) and Chris Smith. All photos taken by George M. Graham Jr.

"SURFING FOR AUTISM"... CONTINUED.



Picture 1 (L to R): Tom Rogers, Gordon Jones (back), and Ayden Granitzki (student). Picture 2 (L to R): John McDanel, Dominique Dixon (student), and Chris Smith. Picture 3: The water was rough, but the kids and surfers rose to the challenge. Photos by George M. Graham Jr.

Mark shared, "Watching the kids ride the waves was incredible. I had the honor of watching my son get pushed into waves by my best friend, and his Godfather, John McDanel. When I saw Jake go gliding down the face of the wave, I was speechless, which never happens. It was truly a God moment."

Another parent shared she had tried for three years to get her son into another surfing event for children with autism and was thrilled when she received her time slot for her son to participate in Surfing for Autism. The mother's birthday was the next day and she stated this was the best birthday present she could have ever received.

One parent shared it was comforting to be around others who simply understood. When their child began to be overwhelmed by the stimulus, other parents understood and there was no need to hide the child's outburst in fear of being judged by others.

Eileen said, "Because it was important to us in organizing the event that we knew the children we were working with, we asked for information on the registration form about the child's interests, dislikes, what helps calm them and any other information that would be important to know. It was later shared this was incredibly helpful as the first child to go out surfing was overwhelmed by the waves and water. However, because the surfers and skilled workers knew this child loved Indiana Jones, they were able to ask him what Indiana Jones would do ... and with that, the child immediately went into the water without looking back!"

Another surfer, Allen Presgraves, was so inspired by his experience working with the children in the water that he asked Samantha Lulo (Exceptional Children teacher) if he could team up with her to take her class of children with special needs out surfing.

This year the event hosted approximately 30 children. Next year the plans are to have more children. Eileen said, "We are hoping to have a Luau in order to allow families the opportunity to connect more with one another while also hanging out with the amazing volunteers we have here on the OBX. We also plan to provide something that allows the siblings of our children with autism to connect with one another."

Mark concluded, "The other thing, among many that day, that I will never forget: we were in the parking lot hanging out getting ready to leave. Eileen asked Savannah, her daughter, if she would like to say anything to me before we all left. She looked right at me with her beautiful eyes and said, 'Thank you for letting me surf.' I did everything I could not to lose it right in front of her. She touched my heart."

He added, "Here is something I do every day and take for granted sometimes, and on this one day a child's life was touched through surfing. It was one of the most amazing days of my life."

I would like to thank Eileen Lowery and Mark Slagle for their contributions to this article. More importantly, thanks to them both for the difference they made in the lives of children and surfers by making this event happen.