

Don Lugo staff members provide freedom through surfing

Hitting the waves had a different meaning this summer for Don Lugo High Assistant Principal John Ashby and Don Lugo physical education teacher Nikki Busch.

The two were among a team of volunteers that helped persons with spinal cord injury and other types of paralysis surf the California coast.

About seven years ago, a college buddy told Ashby about the Life Rolls On organization that helps people with paralysis enjoy physical freedom again through adaptive surfing and skating.

“Life Rolls On gives people the exhilaration of freedom beyond paralysis,” said Jesse Billauer, Life Rolls On founder and executive director/CEO, on the non-profit group’s website.

Billauer was a Junior U.S. surfer on the verge of turning professional when a wave slammed him into a sandbar and he was instantly paralyzed. He wanted to get back to the sport he loved, and enlisted the aid of the surfing community to create adaptive equipment. Billauer went on to surf the big waves of Fiji and to compete at the U.S. Open of Surfing, according to the Life Rolls On website. He founded the organization on Sept. 11, 2001 and achieved non-profit status the next year.

The organization hosts athletic events and celebrations on both coasts of the United States, as well as in Nova Scotia, Canada.

Ashby told his fellow Don Lugo staff members about the program in August, and Busch signed on for the next event on Aug. 22 at Huntington Beach. The two Don Lugo staff members were assigned to Team Neon Green, helping 14 disabled athletes who wanted to surf. The teams are divided into sand and water crews. The sand crews help the athlete get into wet suits and life vests and get out to the water’s edge on special wheelchairs. The water crews help the athletes get on the surfboard, out into the water, and they also help stabilize the boards if the disabled athletes need that as they surf to the shore. Ashby has been a water crew leader for at least the last five years.

Both Ashby and Busch also volunteered at a Life Rolls On surfing event in September in La Jolla Shores.

“It was a phenomenal experience,” Busch said.

The big moments for Busch were the “smiles on the athletes’ faces, to see them being free, to see the look on the families’ faces.” Busch said one of the athlete’s grandmothers was in the water in her street clothes, taking photographs.

“It’s what the ocean brings to everybody,” Busch said of the freedom the athletes experience on the surfboards.

Ashby said it is hard to choose a favorite moment from the 25 Life Rolls On events he has attended in the last seven years, but two eventually came to his mind.

One was a grown daughter being able to help her father surf again. He had taught her to surf when she was younger and he was healthy. The man had been unable to surf after having several strokes and losing the ability to speak.

The second was an 11-year-old boy with disabilities, who went into the water while 6- to 8-foot waves were hitting Huntington Beach. Ashby was worried the youngster would be afraid. "But, he was just having the time of his life," Ashby said.

"It's literally emotional all day long," Ashby said of the Life Rolls On events.

The athletes, who may have accident-related paralysis, spina bifida, cerebral palsy or other mobility-limiting problems, range in age from 2 to 70, Ashby said.

"You have to appreciate what you have," the assistant principal said. "These folks are pushing their limits, finding freedom, and taking the dis out of disability. It empowers people."

Ashby said his participation in the organization has also changed him. "It gives you a different outlook on life," he said.

Life Rolls On is the official charity of the U.S. Open Surfing Championship. For more information about the organization, visit its website at www.liferollson.org.

Pictured:

Don Lugo High Assistant Principal John Ashby (center, holding a young boy) and Don Lugo physical education teacher Nikki Busch (kneeling behind surfboard, second from right) at La Jolla Shores during a Life Rolls On event to help paralyzed persons surf.