

Ride the Wave

As Gary and I float in the 56° south swell of Pacific City, Oregon, I listen to his soothing South African accent instructing me to “pop up” the instant the green wave breaks. I feel the slight push of his tan, gentle hands on the 5’ Kelly Slater board—a board that he never let anyone else use—to guide me into the massive, powerful wave. The fear running through my small body is soothed when Gary encourages me with a confident tone, assuring me I can conquer the enormous rolling wave rushing towards us.

I turn right onto the face of the wave, my first real turn on a wave at 10 years old.

I remember the freedom I felt in that moment—like the luckiest person alive, all of the stress of the world melting away. My mom is cheering on the beach taking endless photos; my dad surfing in the near distance beaming with pride. I remember looking back at Gary who was flashing a love sign to me with his right hand, ready to help me catch the next wave.

From this moment on, surfing has taught me how to connect with nature and to take a step back from my busy life when necessary. Gary taught me how to float with my thoughts, how to love the water and nature. To love the power of the ocean. To love carving on a shortboard to the sandy shore.

My non-surfing life is defined as nonstop. I like to be busy. Yet, sometimes this backfires. The constant activities back to back—waking up at 6 a.m. to hit the gym, straight to a kids camp full of 150 energetic kiddos running and hanging all over me, straight to another task before cramming in a healthy, fueling meal before my late soccer practice in the evening.

I have a love-hate relationship with my schedule. I live life with big expectations for myself and from others to succeed and perform. Soccer is an intense sport, and as a center forward, the expectation from my coaches and team is for me to score, to win the game. The expectation from my parents and friends is to keep up grades and thrive socially. I typically handle the pressure well, because I’ve developed ways to deal with it and escape when needed.

Even more than one of my escapes, surfing has allowed me to connect with my dad. This small activity gave us something to bond over, unrelated to our typical, hectic lives. I admire my dad’s busy schedule and hard work, but when we get in the water, it’s just the two of us. No clients, friends, or family. Just us. Surfing has given my dad an outlet to travel, to express love, and to model how to disconnect.

Gary Gregg passed away right before the Covid-19 pandemic from brain cancer. Everytime I get in the water, whether it’s on the beaches of Mexico, Costa Rica, Hawaii, California or the Oregon

Coast, it's for Gary. I know that this is what he would have wanted for me. He would be proud of my progress and my ability to use this sport to slow down for a few hours and reflect on my busy life.

Although I know life is a large, powerful wave that will hit with full force, I also know I have the skills to ride that wave. Not only will I be able to ride it, I know I will thrive. Allowing myself to disengage when needed, will allow me to succeed personally, as well as in academics and athletics—simply appreciating my surroundings by living in the present moment.

These moments have carried and molded me in how I live my life. The connection to nature and the skill I have gained from surfing with Gary have not only improved my happiness and peace, but also my motivation, and my ability to continue to push to new levels that I didn't even know existed. This ability to restore and re-energize will carry me through college soccer, as well as through tough STEM courses, preparing me for a successful career, and a fulfilled lifestyle.