

Uncharted waters



Junior Nikki Lyssy catches a wave in Port Aransas Sept. 28. She was there as part of the Realtrex program, which offers outdoor opportunities for blind and visually impaired teenagers.

courtesy photo

Blind teen takes on surfing, parasailing

The water licked lazily at my toes and feet as I waded into its waiting arms, anticipating the excitement to come as a surfboard beckoned me. As I became used to the lukewarm water, my heart took flight in my chest, my spirits soaring as I climbed onto the familiar board, crawling until I'd found the perfect position to wait for the absolute best wave. As I lay on the board waiting, I began to think about the truly amazing opportunities I have had because of the Realtrex Organization.

When I was first asked to join this group of blind and visually impaired students who are taught the ropes of camping, cooking and navigating the outdoor world without sight, I thought it would provide me with amazing experiences, but I had no idea that they would encompass such a wide range of activities. When I found out we were going to Port Aransas for an educational yet fun weekend of surfing, cooking and parasailing, I was beyond excited.

On Sept. 27, my sister Kendal and I hopped into a minivan with eight of our fellow Realtrexers and rolled down to the coast. The excitement I felt as I anticipated the rush of doing things I'd never done before was incredible. Everyone else was feeling it too, as we all chattered about various things. As we drove, we were told that we were going to be surfing Friday night and parasailing Saturday afternoon. I was exhilarated; I'd only ever read about parasailing in books. Because the trip is also educational, we were taught how to budget money properly for meals, parasailing lessons and other such things. Since surfing didn't require a cent, all we had to do was show up and wait.

Every year, a nonprofit volunteer organization called SurfRider comes to the beach to help us surf without sight. I've been surfing before with SurfRider, but every time is different because the waves, the weather and how deep I am in the ocean changes each time. At times, it can be scary not having a strong sense of exactly where the shore is, and the ocean is the one place my cane doesn't give me information, but I truly trusted the guide who I was with. As my guide held the board back from galloping out to sea, I felt my heart drumming in my chest as I heard the "swoosh" of an approaching wave. My heartbeat kicked up 300 notches as I anticipated the huge whitecap approaching. "Aw, not this one," my guide said, yanking the board back, and my heart deflated slightly. I'd misjudged the size of the wave and what I originally thought was a huge one was only a baby ripple. However, I wasn't out of hope. Friday night's weather was virtually perfect, and the summery climate helped to create the perfect combination of waves.

My guide, having decided that this was the right wave for me, shoved the board onto the crest. I struggled to my knees, gripping the board with both hands for support, then eased myself upright on my feet for one astonishing second before voluntarily jumping off the board and splashing into the salty water. This pattern of standing up and then leaping into the waves was familiar for me, because it takes me a few minutes to understand the water's mind, so to speak, and how it is working at that particular moment in time. As the waves

continued to break, I began to stand for longer increments of time: 10 seconds, then 20, then, finally 30, before I took a final plummet into the water with a huge splash. At that point, I'd been at it for an hour, and decided I was done for the night. To be honest, I was slightly disappointed with the size of the waves. I'd hoped for bigger and scarier waves to give me the rush I usually enjoy while surfing. I wasn't too sad, though; after all, I knew that the next day's main event, parasailing, would be completely new.

When the time for parasailing finally arrived and our lessons were paid for, my nerves felt like they were going to burst. Deep down in my heart, I was grateful that our counselors had decided to keep this adventure secretive until the day before it was to take place, because I know I would have talked myself out of it. When I was first told we were going to be parasailing, I thought, "Am I going to be alive to tell this tale?" The second thing I thought was, "What type of regret would I have if I didn't give this a shot?" Luckily, the guides could read my mind, because they showed us all a verbal video which described exactly what we would be doing. In great detail, the calm voice on the video explained that we would be strapped into a harness and suspended 500 feet into the air, attached to the back of a boat. Because of the video, I had a much clearer idea of exactly what I was in for. As we sat on the boat and our captain drove toward the bay, I prayed that I would make it out of this adventure in one piece. As the three groups ahead of mine floated 500 feet above the boat and then came back in one piece, I began to think I actually might too.

"Are we ready to go?" the parasailing instructor asked. I ignored the pounding of my heart as I was hooked into a harness that functions more like a chair. Kendal was strapped in next to me, and our counselor Eric was in between us to help balance the weight efficiently. "This is going to be awesome!" we screamed as we were lifted first five, then 10, then 20 feet into the air. From that moment, the only way I can think to describe it is like flying. I felt like the birds in the sky. This bliss only lasted for 10 minutes, but I was amazed at the coolness of the air, the beauty of our surroundings, and the silence that permeated the air. When the journey was over, I wished it had lasted indefinitely because it was so incredible.

The rest of the weekend flew by in a blur of activity – spaghetti-making, watching a movie and finally, packing to head back to reality. As we drove home, I thought about all of the experiences I'd had over the two days I'd been away. Things that I'd only read about in books suddenly came to life in a way I never imagined they could. Things that I previously thought I couldn't do because I was too afraid to become some of my best memories. Thinking on those memories now gives me a warm and fuzzy feeling, and I am forever grateful to the Realtrex group and SurfRider for making these dreams come true. Most important of all, the experiences of surfing and parasailing taught me that anything is truly possible if you have faith and trust in those guiding and supporting you.

—Nikki Lyssy