



# Freedom of the Sea

by Peter Bronski

Janet Zeller has been paddling kayaks for more than 45 years. But what most people don't realize when they see her in her boat is that she has quadriplegia, with paralysis in her lower limbs and limited use of her hands.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Zeller was an avid whitewater paddler. Then, in the mid-1980s, she discovered sea kayaking. All the while, non-kayaking family and friends thought she was crazy for embracing "risky" paddle sports. So when they heard that Zeller had been seriously injured, they thought, "We knew this was going to happen to her." But they were wrong.

Zeller wasn't injured kayaking, but rather in a freak work-related accident as a librarian. "So much for the hazards of paddling," she jokes today. "Disability comes when you least expect it." But joking aside, it was a difficult time. "One of my greatest fears when I realized the extent of my disability was that I was going to lose my paddling," Zeller says.

She didn't know anyone who had a disability who paddled, and worried about how she would manage things like the rudder on her sea kayak. The accident very well could have marked the end of her kayaking days. Instead, it started Zeller on a search for other paddlers with disabilities, and for ways she could adapt her kayak to work with her body's new limited mobility.

Zeller placed small ads in all the paddling magazines she could think of, and soon was contacted by more than fifty people. It made her realize two things: there was a need and a demand for more information about adaptive paddling—paddling kayaks using standard equipment adapted or modified to compensate for loss of function due

to a paddler's disability—and that there were people working independently to improve adaptive paddling but that no one had put all of the pieces of the puzzle together. That was in 1989, a year after her accident.

In that same year, Zeller got back into paddling—sea kayaking off the New Hampshire coast between Rye Harbor and Odiorne Point. The region is popular among sea kayakers and small-boat operators, who launch in a protected harbor and head out into open water. On the first day back in her kayak after the accident, Zeller paddled past other boats, chatting about where they'd been and where they were going. As the day drew to a close, she pulled up to the take-out alongside many of the kayakers she had seen out on the water earlier in the day.

"Then they see me coming out at the boat launch and being lifted into a powered wheelchair. Many had shocked expressions and made comments," Zeller says. "To them I had been just another paddler on the water, but now I was different."

According to the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research, nearly one in five (approximately 50 million) people in the United States has a disability. According to Canada's Ministry of Community and Social Services, more than 1 in 10 Canadians live with a disability. The disabilities range from arthritis and back pain, to blindness and other vision impairments, spinal cord injury (and paralysis), strokes, amputations, and a host of neurological disorders.

But not all of these disabilities make it impossible to participate in paddling. For people like Zeller—who went on to coauthor the book, *Canoeing and Kayaking*

*for Persons with Disabilities*—the challenge became how to make canoeing and kayaking accessible to people living with various types of disabilities.

And she wasn't alone. From his home on the Hudson River in Queensbury, NY, Todd Jorgensen MD is promoting adaptive paddling throughout the medical community. As a physical medicine and rehabilitation specialist and as the medical director for Glens Falls Hospital's Rehabilitation Unit, Jorgensen works with patients who've suffered a variety of traumatic injuries or other catastrophic events, like the onset of a neurological disorder, to improve their quality of life and coach them back to functional independence.

A trip to Tracy Arm Fjord in Alaska at the end of his medical residency at Albany Medical Center in 1999 got him hooked on sea kayaking, and since then he has taken many paddling trips to Alaska, British Columbia and the Pacific Northwest. And of course, the Hudson River, literally out his back door, serves as a familiar playground where Jorgensen often paddles three miles downriver to his brother's home in South Glens Falls.

Early on, he saw the potential benefits of introducing his patients to sea kayaking, although it certainly wasn't, and still isn't, standard practice. "It's not something that's taught in medical school," Jorgensen notes. "But we know that certain therapy techniques are useful for rehabilitation, and that sea kayaking is a great way to integrate those techniques into a rehab program." For example, Jorgensen explains, often after an injury, balance and equilibrium are off. "One of the things we try to work on during therapy in those cases are sitting balance and truncal (body core)

PAGE 46 ►

stability,” he says. “Those are difficult for patients to work on independently. But in a kayak, you may not realize it, but you’re constantly adjusting yourself and working those trunk muscles for your stability.”

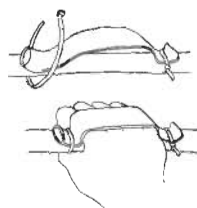
Jorgensen has successfully used his kayak therapy to rehabilitate scores of patients, including a sea kayak rental store owner from Corinth, NY who came down with Guillain-Barré Syndrome, an autoimmune disease that causes one’s body to attack its own nervous system.

Beyond the therapeutic value that Jorgensen brings to adaptive paddling, the freedom, equality and inclusiveness of paddling, notes Zeller, make canoeing and kayaking “the ideal sport for a person with a disability to do with family and friends. When you look at a pod of kayakers, you can’t tell who’s who. That’s a difference I’ve not found in any other outdoor recreation sport. On the water you have barrier-free mobility. You don’t encounter curbs, stairs or other handicaps. You’re free to move about and go with peers everywhere at the same speed to see the same things.”

And the transition from standard to adaptive paddling is easier than one might think. “How many of us have adjusted our seats and our equipment to be just right for our own comfort?” asks Zeller. “Adaptive paddling is no different, just perhaps a little more involved. It’s a case of finding what works and feels right.” Such adaptations range from using sit-on-top kayaks for people who have difficulty getting in and out of closed-cockpit boats, to modified seats that provide more trunk stability, to various rigs that hold the paddle for people who don’t have the mobility to do so on their own.

Peter Crowley, a Project Manager for the Dormitory Authority of the State of New York in Albany, is a family man, with a wife of 21 years and 3 children. He skis 20 – 30 times per year in the Adirondacks, and has paddled seriously for the last ten years. He’s also blind. Crowley was born with optic atrophy, which in his case meant 93% visual loss that only worsened with age.

### Adapted Hand /Paddle Grip



Loosely fasten 2 plastic cable ties around the shaft of the paddle where the paddler places a hand to grasp the paddle. Place a 10” piece of used mountain bike inner tube through the ties. Tighten the cable tie on one side of the paddler’s hand. Stretch the inner tube over the back of the paddler’s hand and hold in place near the second cable tie. Adjust the tension on the inner tube to ensure the paddler can pull the hand out of the grip, then tighten the second cable tie. Using cable ties that have a release tab permits easy adjustment of the adaptation once on the water.

In September 1999 he became the first person with blindness to solo paddle the Hudson River from Albany to New York City, accompanied by a sighted paddling friend in another boat who acted as his eyes. Then, in the summer of 2003, Crowley went on to achieve another first when he solo paddled a folding kayak across the English Channel.

But logging such “firsts” are not what he’s after. Crowley is in it for the love of the sport. “The purpose of my trips is not to get press coverage... they’re things I want to try,” he says. “I remember when a reporter asked me, ‘If you hadn’t been the first blind or disabled person to paddle the English Channel, would you still have done it?’ Of course I would have. I had never done it before. We’ve gotten into this absurd situation in our society where we want to be the first...it’s misdirected...like public self-gratification. To me you have to create the greater good out of it.”

Which is exactly what he’s done. In the wake of his English Channel trip, Crowley traveled to Long Island, NY to the Helen Keller Services for the Blind’s Camp Helen Keller in Farmingdale where he took roughly 15 young children kayaking on the Great South Bay. “What I wanted them to understand is that anything I’ve done, they can do, too...not

just in a boat, but in life,” he says. “The most positive outcome was not that they kayaked, but that on their bus ride back to Farmingdale they were talking about other things they wanted try—horseback riding, canoeing, more kayaking. That’s really the greater good of what I was trying to accomplish.”

During the summer of 2005, Crowley organized a humanitarian mission, with the support of Rotary Clubs from across Long Island, to deliver donated kayak equipment to the Helen Keller Services for the Blind in Panama City, Panama. Soon he hopes to head back to Panama to introduce another young group of would-be paddlers to the sport he loves.

In the end, Crowley, Zeller, Jorgensen and a host of other ambassadors have shown that adaptive paddling has so much to offer—to able-bodied paddlers, to the paddling community as a whole, to our general perspective on life, and of course, to people living with a disability. “For myself, I have this body that’s so uncooperative on land,” concludes Zeller. “But put me in a kayak or a canoe, and I’m part of a sleek craft gliding through the water, with no barriers to stop me. That’s the kind of gift [paddling] gives to someone who has a disability.” ↓

### RESOURCES

#### Adaptive Adventures

[www.adaptiveadventures.org](http://www.adaptiveadventures.org)

#### American Canoe Association – Adaptive Paddling

[www.acanet.org/recreation/adaptivepaddling.lasso](http://www.acanet.org/recreation/adaptivepaddling.lasso)

#### Disabled Sports USA

[www.dsusa.org](http://www.dsusa.org)

#### Outdoor Adventures

[www.outdoor-adventures.org](http://www.outdoor-adventures.org)

#### Outdoor Recreation Opportunities

[www.adaptivepaddling.org](http://www.adaptivepaddling.org)

#### United States Canoe Association

– Adaptive Paddling News  
[www.uscanoe.com/adaptive/](http://www.uscanoe.com/adaptive/)

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