



BY RENEE SMITH

Is sailing the ultimate therapy?

If you met me 12 months ago I was a workaholic. I was totally buried in my career as a coping mechanism to manage my life with a spinal cord injury. I was feeling lost and unsure of myself after having been medically suspended from competing in my para-equestrian sport. The doctors believed I had developed Multiple Sclerosis.

So how is it that today I emanate a different kind of happiness and confidence?

A healthy passion and a love for my family-like community of friends? I didn't quit my job. I didn't uproot my home. And I didn't have a sea change - well, as such. Quite simply, the girl who had always disliked boats, got on a yacht for the first time and fell in love with sailing.

I fell hard and fast.

Spiritually, physically and literally!

Spiritually. It was the moment the bow of Kayle, the 54' Lyons yacht, belonging to Sailors with disABILITIES (SWD) was turned down. I felt her accelerate as her sails harnessed the natural power of the wind.

Physically. The instructors forgot to tell me in advance what the helmsman's call of, "Prepare to tack," means. I had to work out how to slide myself from one side of the boat to the other while timing it just right as the heel changed. Without warning, physically and literally I fell hard and fast!

But as the training sailing session for new SWD volunteers came to an end, I looked at my empty wheelchair awaiting my return on the dock, and all I knew, was that this is where I needed to be.

Behind the fairy-tale of my sailing journey is a mountain of challenges and numerous unpleasant stories. However, all my sailing Instagram posts have the hashtag, #myfreedom attached to them. But how can

I feel free when the physical challenges I face in life continue to besiege me even on the boat? A photo of me belies what is really going on as I sit on the rail as we beat upwind. My partially functional core muscles are screaming as I hold my torso up against the heel of the boat. My arm muscles too, burning from the strain to hold me upright because without any leg or backside muscles to support myself, my arms are the only thing keeping me on the rail and out of the ocean. The pressures on the crushed section of my spinal cord causes me significant nerve pain, battling fatigue, the threat of pressure sores, it is all constant.

But let me tell you there's a much deeper meaning to #myfreedom than simply being free of my wheelchair.

Whether I'm with my fellow SWD race crew who have disabilities, or I'm taking a group of kids or adults with disabilities out for an opportunity to try

sailing with SWD, the same rule applies to all of us and you too. The wind and the ocean doesn't know if you can't walk, can't see or hear, are missing a limb, if you have an intellectual impairment or a mental illness.

#myfreedom is because we all get treated the same - no judgements, no sympathy, no excuses.

#myfreedom is because sailing is a level playing field, an inclusive sport that offers many adaptable options

#myfreedom because every time I achieve a new milestone or simply go out sailing, I know the number of challenges I've needed to overcome, which builds my self-confidence and resilience.

#myfreedom because if you want to be a sailor bad enough you'll fight whatever demons you have and you'll break through.

#myfreedom because here I'm not a disabled person. I'm a sailor. ⚓