

## **My Life Skills through Kayaking**

Over the years, I have often been asked why paddling is so important to me, and why I have chosen to dedicate a huge portion of my life to it. This, I think is an unfair question. It is almost impossible to communicate with words, something that, for me is such a passion, and contains so much of my identity. I can, however, elaborate on what paddling has given to me over the years, and this might shed some light on the overall importance of paddling in my life.

Throughout my education, I struggled with a very difficult learning disability. I was very bad at reading, spelling, and in general school was much more difficult for me, or at least it seemed that way, than it was for my classmates. I profess that I did everything that I could in order to work the education system to try to make school easier. However, when I really started paddling at the age of 14, many things changed including my whole outlook on education. Paddling was something that I had to work hard for, something that I was determined to be good at, and something that I understood could take me places I had only dreamed of. You might ask how this translated to the classroom? The best answer I can provide, is that through paddling, I learned the value of really working hard in the pursuit of something that I valued. I knew how important my education was, and so I tried to apply the same work ethic and process that I had developed in paddling to my education. The result was nothing short of amazing. It has taken a long time, but I have been able to overcome much of what I struggled with as a young student. In essence it was because of paddling and the values and work ethic that I learned in paddling that I was able to get into one of the top liberal arts colleges in the country, sit as secretary on a National Board of Directors at the age of 20 and many other accomplishments that seemed impossible to me only a few short years ago.

It might be a cliché, but personally, paddling really is about the journey, and not about the destination. I can remember being a young teenager, shivering in an ice filled eddie, in February, and thinking to myself, why on earth do I go through all of this. Well, for starters, those frozen days are probably some of my favorite memories. All of us who shivered through those days felt so tough. We felt like we were working harder than anyone else in the country, and in fact we were. The reason... Well, some of us wanted to go to the Olympics, and some of us just loved to paddle, but for each of us, I think it was the idea that we could go somewhere and do something that few people had. In my relatively short paddling career, I have had the honor of paddling in 14 countries, on four continents. I have friends all over the world, and I really consider myself a global citizen. It might be an odd concept for some, but as a kayaker, I am so privileged that almost anywhere I go in the world, I have a place to stay and great friends to visit with.

Paddling has given me so much, that I could easily write a book, on all of my experiences. I will however touch on one other thing that paddling has given me, which I am truly thankful for. Paddling has given me a way to heal. All of us have experienced a long stressful day of school, or work etc. For me, paddling was a place where I could leave everything behind and focus only on the moment. Beyond stress relief, and the pure joy that I get from gliding along on the water, Paddling has given me a profound understanding of my body. I have learned how to better maintain my health and fitness. I have had a number of injuries, which affected my mobility, and paddling, during those times was the one thing I could do to feel totally normal. The tools of body awareness, flow, and the power of the mind, that I have learned through paddling along with many other techniques, have helped me to more quickly

heal from injury both physically and mentally. I believe that it has and will help me lead a happier and healthier life.

I might be repeating myself, but paddling really has given me so much... I have only been able to touch on a few of the things that are most important to me. My hope is, for those who consider taking up paddling that you understand how much the rewards exceed the work that you put in. If you want to go places you have only dreamed of, if you want to reach new heights athletically, educationally, professionally, or personally, paddling can take you there. It is not just a sport; it is a community, a journey, and a way of life that provides incredible opportunity. I am deeply honored to be a part of it.

If you can dare to dream, the river can take you there!

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