

Physically challenged RISE to the adventure

By Jackie Kennedy



Lea Stewart was 17 when an automobile crash threw her from the back of a pickup truck, resulting in a broken neck and severe spinal cord injury. In the 12 years since, the former high school athlete has regained her competitive spirit and now helps quadriplegics like herself pursue active lifestyles.

For Stewart, the favored activity is rugby.

“Rugby,” she says. “I love it... Just the word gets me excited. It is my passion.”

Stewart plays quad rugby with a dozen or so fellow quadriplegics in wheelchairs designed specifically for the sport – all thanks to RISE Adventures, a 501c3 nonprofit formed in Dallas in 2007 to help the physically challenged gain independence through recreational activities and sports adapted for them.

“Our growth has been phenomenal with over 7,500 persons attending our programs, including participants, volunteers, staff and sponsors,” says RISE Founder and CEO Paul Gray. Volunteers have contributed more than 30,000 hours to the organization since its inception, he adds.

Stewart joined RISE when it began and serves as program director for the Board of Directors. The nonprofit makes a significant difference in the lives of those with physical challenges, she says, speaking from experience: “I can’t imagine my life without it.”

In high school, the outgoing young woman participated in a variety of activities, from volleyball and running to camping and water skiing. After the accident and months of physical therapy, she graduated from high school in Boerne, near San Antonio, and earned her bachelor’s degree in recreation management and youth leadership from Brigham Young University in 2003. Following graduation, she moved to Dallas to begin her career as a certified therapeutic recreation specialist (CTRS) at Baylor Institute for Rehabilitation where she works on a spinal cord injury team.

While undergoing therapy for her injuries, Stewart discovered specialized programs that provide physically disabled persons with sports activities and outdoor experiences. But the fees they charged often made participation impossible.

“The big difference with RISE is you don’t have to pay,” she says.

Along with providing an opportunity to play, adaptive equipment, and volunteers experienced in helping the physically challenged, RISE Adventures does it for free.

“Nothing is cheap in the wheelchair world,” says Stewart, noting that an adapted rugby chair costs about \$5,000, an expense that would prohibit most with physical disabilities from participating in such activities. “You don’t find many programs like this with the equipment and volunteers and it’s all free with no membership fees, no participation fees, and no equipment rental fees. It’s all free.”

That's what makes RISE unique and beneficial to the community, according to Stewart.

"It's nice to be able to be involved in a program and around people in the same condition as you, where they can motivate and challenge you," she says. "Being able to compete on a rugby team—that's where I can take off my shield and be aggressive, show the boys I'm a girl but I can still play just as tough. Plus, it's a great workout and with a physical challenge, you need something to keep physically fit so you can continue to do everyday activities."

With 20 recreational programs offered year-round and more than 500 activities scheduled this year alone, RISE Adventures offers something each week, leaving those with physical challenges little excuse to be inactive. The organization's inclusive approach allows family members and friends to get in on the fun.

"Families want to see you happy, to challenge yourself and loving life, so we get parents and children together," says Stewart, pointing out that a special summer kickoff bash and end-of-summer bash offer families ample opportunity to experience a variety of activities, all in one day with the whole family invited to dive in. (Yes, water activities are on tap.)

The end result can be summed up in the organization's acronymic name, RISE, which stands for: Recovery, Inspiration, Success, and Empowerment.

"I've noticed each one of these throughout all the activities I've participated in," says Stewart. "I've seen recovery after new injuries. The guys here inspire me to be a better individual. I've experienced success after trying to do new things. And there's certainly empowerment I feel after succeeding. So, I've experienced each of these in my own personal life."

Without RISE, says Stewart, she wouldn't be able to kayak in Alaska like she did last summer or participate in other adapted sports such as fishing, golf, horseback riding and jet skiing.

"That's where I feel freedom and don't even know I have a disability," she says.

And then there's rugby.

Stewart kicks off each weekend on Friday evenings when she joins a dozen others to play quad rugby in specialized sports chairs on a basketball court. It's a contact wheelchair sport with four players from each team on the court at all times. Stewart serves as a player for the offense and is one of her team's top ball handlers, passing the ball in from the side lines or moving it down the court in hopes of scoring.

In December, the Quad Rugby Team RISE Adventures took on the Dallas Harlequins in a charity fund raising quad rugby event in Irving, helping fund Christmas for children by supporting Toys for Tots and Triggers Toys. Along with C&R Medical and Lift Aids, *ON Magazine* served as sponsor for the event.

"We had a blast getting the Harlequins in the sports chairs as a fun eye-opener," says Stewart, praising the sponsors for supporting the event.

While her family remains in Las Vegas and Utah, Stewart finds RISE to be her local support system.

"It's deeper than just recreation," she says. "It's a family. Truly, it is. I'm thankful for the program because it has changed my life and I'm hoping to educate others so it can change their lives as well. You have to share the good things out there and this is definitely one of them."

As a nonprofit, RISE depends on sponsors, grants and volunteers to provide its services. For more information or to volunteer, visit www.riseadventures.org.

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