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## Personal injury litigator shares joy of surfing with veterans, at-risk youths

By Shane Nelson  
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It turns out paddling the 32 miles of Pacific between Catalina and Manhattan Beach on a 17-foot surfboard isn't entirely different from trying cases.

The two are strangely similar largely because in both endeavors something will inevitably go wrong, according to Aaron L. Osten, an associate at Greene Broillet & Wheeler LLP.

"You're navigating through some pretty scary stuff in both the channel and in court," Osten explained. "You have to be ready for whatever is thrown at you in the channel, and you have to learn how to adapt. In court, you have to think on your feet. You have to be quick and remain confident, because you're always going to have an expert go south on you or a client say something unexpected."

Osten rode his first wave at 5 and surfed competitively at Mira Costa High School and San Diego State University, but it wasn't until August 2009 that he tackled his first Catalina Classic Paddleboard Race, a grueling five- to eight-hour paddle — either on one's belly or kneeling — between the offshore island and Manhattan Beach Pier. The 37-year-old personal injury litigator has completed the annual channel crossing five times, raising more than \$10,000 for the Jimmy Miller Memorial Foundation — a nonprofit that helps wounded veterans and at-risk youths overcome trauma through surfing and ocean therapy. Osten plans to compete again in the punishing Catalina event this summer.

Quick to compare ocean distance paddling to hiking through a terrestrial wilderness, Osten clearly adores the austere beauty of the Pacific miles from shore.

"Sometimes the fog comes in when you're out there," he said. "And you don't really know where you are and you're completely detached from the world. You'll see whales, you see sharks, you see dolphins and sunfish. You see all walks of life out there, and you realize just how small a speck we are on the planet."

Timothy J. Wheeler, the managing partner at Greene Broillet, knows the Catalina Classic well. He's manned the event's chase boats for a number of years. Wheeler noted that Catalina Classic competitors are commonly at "the whim of the sea," traversing some of the most treacherous waters on the California coast.

"There is no question the mental toughness and competitive attitude a paddler must have to endure



Aaron Osten / Special to the Daily Journal

Aaron Osten paddles alongside a Marine as a part of his volunteer work with the Jimmy Miller Memorial Foundation, a nonprofit that helps wounded veterans and at-risk youth overcome trauma through surfing and ocean therapy.

32 miles nonstop in six to eight hours gives them an edge in the courtroom," Wheeler said. "You need that same toughness and that same competitive attitude to be a successful lawyer."

Regularly representing clients in wrongful death cases against automakers, Osten said the opportunity to help others spurred his decision to become an attorney. And introducing veterans and at-risk children to the ocean and surfing, volunteer work Osten's been doing since 2001, helps him remember how fortunate he's been.

Late last month, Osten was standup paddle boarding with Marines at Camp Pendleton, where he spent a morning on the ocean with a woman whose post-traumatic stress disorder "was off the charts," he said.

"She told me when she's on land, she's always on such high alert that she can't ever have piece of mind," Osten recalled. "By the end of the morning, she was having so much fun that we had to pull her out of the water. ... It was just one of the best days I've had in a long time."

Carly Rogers, the Jimmy Miller Memorial Foundation's director of programming, said Osten is a terrific listener, bonding with veterans and children in short periods of time. An occupational therapist who completed a 2011 study on the impact of surf therapy for veterans, Rogers explained that those suffering from PTSD often isolate and withdraw, commonly reliving the worst of their memories

over and over. According to Rogers' research, surfing can help.

"You are completely in the moment when you're on a wave," she said. "All of your senses are engaged, and you're not thinking about anything else. You're using your muscles, your mind, your reflexes. All of your capabilities are focused on harnessing the ocean's energy."

For Joseph Taschler, a retired Marine diagnosed with a major depressive disorder, PTSD, and severe anxiety following his three tours of duty in Iraq, time surfing near Camp Pendleton with Osten and the foundation was unforgettable.

"Surfing really helped me relax and brought me to the here and now instead of constantly thinking about the past and my deployments," Taschler said, adding that he was hopelessly hooked after his first ride. "It basically brought me from zero to 10 as far as feeling horrible to feeling great, and my anxiety went completely out the window, because I was just focused on the waves."

It's that distinctive brand of joy Osten hopes to share when teaching veterans and children to surf, but he admits the experience is just as significant for him.

"It means the world to me when I see a kid smiling in the water or a Marine standing up on a wave," Osten said. "It always brings me back to that baseline of, 'Wow, I have it really good, but unless I help other people, I'm not complete.'"