

Words by Enrique Gili Photos by Pat Notaro

SURFER'S HEALING

A program to teach kids the joys of the ocean shows that surfing can break open the locked box of autism!

Surfers have a reputation for a lifestyle revolving around three Bs (boards, babes, and bongos) – the perpetual boys of summer chasing the next perfect wave, etc., etc. On the surface it appears we're locked into a narcissistic sport in which glory is

bestowed upon those who pull into the heaviest wave or bust the most radical maneuver.

Israel "Izzy" Paskowitz squashes that stereotype. To hundreds of non-surfing parents, Izzy is the dude who can put thousand-watt smiles on the faces of their autistic children.

"Surfing is a great pastime for anyone, but especially for my son, Isaiah," says the lifelong waterman. "They're all here because of him." And it's true. The news that their son suffered from autism had been devastating to Israel and his wife Danielle. To manage his own grief, and to help Isaiah, the former pro rider and surf camp operator began taking his son surfing. According to Israel, Isaiah emerged from the water a changed person.

In 2000, believing they were on to something, Israel and Danielle founded Surfers Healing (surfershealing.org), a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing free surf lessons to autistic children with the help of pro and amateur riders.

Paskowitz believes surfing calms autistic children, enabling them to focus; he is convinced that almost any kind of water experience is beneficial. "Surfing rocks their world," says Paskowitz. Now, he encourages parents to bring their autistic children down to the beach for therapeutic surf sessions.

"The surfers are 100% behind us," says Paskowitz.

He wishes the surf industry would take notice, but in the meantime, private donations from well-wishers keep Surfers Healing afloat. The program is a grassroots effort sustained by his friends and family. "Financially, we're dirt, we're below the grass," he says.

It is the summer of 2004 and 76 children, aged between 3 and 16 years-old, and their parents, have gathered at Topanga State Beach near Malibu for a day of fun in the ocean. The event is underwritten by a charitable organization run by *Variety* magazine.

Wave conditions are near perfect for extended – even thrilling – surf sessions. A modest swell is generating almost chest-high sets of fast-moving water.

Loading autistic kids onto surfboards is an exercise in controlled chaos. Unsure as to how their children will react, parents watch anxiously from the shoreline as they wander in and out of a sea of bodies. The roar of the crowd rumbles over the beach, making communication difficult, but there is some order to what's happening.

The instructors work in teams. Wetsuited wranglers pass squirming kids over to waiting instructors who stand in churning whitewater holding longboards at the ready.

Opposite - It all came together at Topanga Beach last summer, as the Surfer's Healing surf camp scored excellent conditions to stoke a few kids, one by one. **Top:** First-time instructor Calib Wilborn was the hero of the day, taking autistic kids on the slides of their lives. **Below:** Instructor Josh Frowley shifting into powerglide and aiming for the long run. The waves were perfect, and the other surfers in the water showed respect and consideration for the tandem efforts.





Above -
The timing and coordination required to catch and ride a rolling ocean swell are tough for anyone, but with a knowledgeable instructor it's as easy as one-two-three.

Below -
Calib guides another kid out into the wild world of surge and opportunity.

Some kids are veterans of the surf camp and know what's in store, others are in for a wet surprise. Each child reacts differently; some are mellow, others require prodding; a few fight back, kicking and screaming. Most kids, however, quickly settle down and go calmly out to sea, lying on the front of a longboard, propelled by an instructor paddling behind them. One boy is so stoked he's waving to the crowd as he rides in tandem with his on-board buddy.

Pitching an uninitiated child onto a surfboard may seem cruel to some observers. But to the parents of these autistic children, the event is a godsend – a rare opportunity to spend a

normal day at the beach in a supportive environment.

Autism is a neurological disorder affecting the normal development of the brain in areas dealing with social interaction and communication skills. According to the Autism Society of America approximately 1.5 million Americans have autism or some form of pervasive developmental disorder (PDD). Despite a lot of medical detective work, the disorder continues to baffle scientists, making treatment difficult.

However, "there's much greater awareness than there used to be," says Jennifer Tracy, event coordinator for Surfers Healing. Not long ago, she says, many of these kids would have been



institutionalized. Now, emphasis is placed on long-term therapy to help the kids and their parents cope with the day-to-day challenges of dealing with autism.

Nick Hernandez, a surf instructor for Surfers Healing, emerges from the water to high-fives after catching one of the longest rides of the day. Hernandez believes that just being a part of today's events is a blessing. Children revere him, and parents thank him profusely. He gushes, "I'm very privileged that I'm able to participate... I'm honored that parents entrust me with their children."

Parents sing the praises of the surfers present and the benefits of the program. Today's surf session provides a real sense of pride and accomplishment. "I'm not an expert on autism, but I'm an expert on Luke," says Ted Rose when speaking of his son. "Surfing has definitely made an impression," he says. "My son is behind in his academic and social development, but this morning, Luke was giving me directions on how to get here."

Jay and Susan Newhouse have brought their three sons – Brett, 7, Brock, 5 and Sam, 3 – from Orange County for their second season. Susan discovered Surfers Healing through a network of parents whose children suffer from autism. Brett is a high-functioning 7 year-old, but generally he gives strangers the silent treatment.

"It was cold and wet," Brett tells his father. Even so, he catches three waves. Brett doesn't say much, but it's apparent to his Dad that surfing was a peak experience for him. His

eyes are sparkling. Later in the day, Brett plays with another autistic boy his age which, according to his father, is something of an accomplishment.

Susan says that just being on the beach with parents of autistic children is relaxing. "It's very comforting to know that your kid is in a safe and supportive environment," she says, adding, "It's very relaxing knowing what your kid is going to do."

The founders of Surfers Healing have grand plans – namely, providing regular surf lessons to all autistic children that want them, both in the States and internationally. At this point, the demand far outstrips their limited resources. "We'd like to go around the world, wherever there's surf, offering lessons at no charge," says Danielle Paskowitz. They'll probably have to save that goal for next year, but judging by the smiles on the faces of the kids, and the highly supportive response of their parents, Surfers Healing has many more miracles to perform.

If you want to know more about Surfers Healing, or have ideas on how to help expand its scope please check out their site: www.surfershealing.org or izzy@surfershealing.org

Above -
Waiting for a free ride, one of the kids wraps his arms around Izzy Paskowitz, founder of Surfers Healing and himself the father of an autistic child. The boy was crying at first, but the ocean soon calmed him. He was stoked by the time he returned to the beach!

surfershealing.org