



This morning most of you probably woke up and got out of bed, jumped in the shower, dressed yourself, then walked to your local bus stop to get into work or maybe strolled to a cafe to grab a coffee.

Big deal, huh?

On the weekend I met a group of people for whom this is the equivalent of a trip to the moon, or running through a field of sunflowers chasing the love of their life - in short, getting out of bed and dressing themselves would be the sweetest experience they could dream of and, sadly, it's one which most of them will never have.

There is, however, one thrilling new experience they have now had the pleasure of enjoying: [surfing](#).

Saturday was the annual "Let's Go Surfing Day" for the [Disabled Surfers Association of Australia's](#) Sydney Branch and it saw more than 100 disabled people take to the waves at Collaroy beach for what was the most remarkable eight hours of humanity I've ever witnessed.

The blind, the crippled, the injured, the brain-damaged, autistic and the deaf were [guided into the surf](#) by hundreds of equally incredible volunteers and as I watched and did my own small part to help, all I could think was "you will never complain again" ...

The DSA was founded in 1986 by surfer, Gary Blaschke, after he lost a kneecap in a motorcycle accident, and he realised how difficult it was for people with disabilities to get into the water.

Since then his organisation, whose sole aim is to put "smiles on dials", has gone national and caters to individuals with all classes of disabilities, from those made paraplegic in car accidents to others born with profound and complex disabilities.

It's a cliché that if you think you have problems, you should visit a children's cancer ward and the main issue I have with this mindset is it seems a case of "thank god it's not me", like people with disabilities exist just to remind us how fortunate we are.

There's no escaping this part of the equation when you interact with the disabled, but the other more profound effect is plain and simple grace - the courage, the dignity and warmth you find in people who utterly understand life is not about the brand of jeans you wear.

Like Tim, who at age 21, lost control of his car and woke up in hospital with severe brain damage and had to relearn how to walk, talk and eat but is now studying communications at TAFE.

Tim's life changed forever one night on a wet road leading into Maitland, as did his new mate Marshall's, when his car smashed into a pole and also left him unable to walk or talk and without a sense of smell.

Tim and Marshall were two of the star surfers of the day, being far more mobile than some of the other participants, who had to be [carried](#), [lifted and hauled](#) into the waves, [screaming with laughter](#) - like my new mate, [Matt the Surf Rat](#).

The ocean can be a pretty intimidating place and I've seen many, many able-bodied people panic when they've been caught by breakers or rips and realised they were at the mercy of elements far more powerful than them.

Imagine that feeling if you were blind, had cerebral palsy, were quadriplegic and had no arms or legs to use - or in the case of Len, just one arm and leg?

Len lost one of each when he fell under the wheels of a train at the Wollongong steelworks more than a decade ago but that hasn't stopped him hitting waves on a body board.

I spent about twenty minutes with Len, helping him through the breakers, chatting about his life and family and realised very quickly that, though he may have only half a body, Len is double the man of so many guys I meet who bitch and moan about their high-paying jobs, their girlfriends and the rent on their beachside apartments.

Len didn't have any choice in the lesson he was taught about what really matters in life - but we do and I invite you to watch [this short video](#) for a crash course.

It's a piece by the ABC's *7.30 Report* and features Len and [Kelly McKann](#), who I also had the brief pleasure of meeting on Saturday.

Wheelchair-bound since a car accident when she was three, Kelly cannot move any of her limbs and can only breathe with the assistance of a ventilator.

As one of the marshals who organised Saturday's event yelled at us over the waves: "this is my reset moment every year because, no matter how tough my year was, it wasn't as tough as this woman's and no matter how good my year's been, it doesn't get any better than this moment."

It took more than 60 people to get Kelly into the water, fifty of us forming a corridor from the shallows out to the breakers, another eight to carry Kelly face up on a surfboard, and two nurses to manually [inflate her lungs](#) with a hand-held squeeze bag.

Kelly, who breathes through a tracheotomy (an open hole in her neck), was then unhooked from her squeeze bag and held her breath for the quick trip to the beach, smiling up at our faces and the clouds as she [passed by on the wave](#) and was then quickly given air.

Then she did it all again.

It was, without a doubt, the most remarkable thing I've ever seen in person and I know I wasn't the only one who had tears pouring down my face, marvelling at the trust Kelly was putting in us, complete strangers.

The Disabled Surfers Association has some very important lessons to teach all Australians - and they extend beyond just the disabled, to the elderly, to the unfortunate, to the people living next door: you enlarge your world when you care for others.

Gary Blaschke told the *7.30 Report*: "We've got something we can sell to the rest of the world. We can teach a lot of people not to lock your disabled people up in rooms and let them waste away. Let them get out there and experience what life is all about - fun. Surfing."

The DSA has branches in all mainland states of Australia except Victoria and is now looking to establish its network at Barwon Heads, near Geelong, in October this year.

The organisation survives on a hodgepodge of donations from friends and corporations but what it really needs is a fairy godmother sponsor who can guarantee it the small amount of cash it needs to fund its [incredible vision](#).

"We don't need much to operate on," said national secretary Jim Bradley, "but to increasingly touch so many lives requires, on-going, more funds. We are a totally voluntary charity doing something that is unique, not only here in Australia, but world-wide."

"Undoubtedly there is a major sponsor out there who will embrace us, hopefully some time in the near future," said Jim.

People ask what you need to "have" to be involved with the DSA and the members' answer is always the same: "a big heart, we'll teach you the rest."

If you would like to contact the DSA, to volunteer or make a donation, please visit their website, [here](#).

THANKS: To photographer Benjamin Sherack of [Benzwaves](#) who supplied all the fantastic shots, including the great picture at the top of the post of DSA founder Gary Blaschke with Saturday's surfer of the day [Tom Terrific](#). Sue Picton took the shots of Kelly McKann being carried and surfing.

EXTRA SPECIAL THANKS: To the event sponsors, Global Surf Industries, Warringah Council, Chefs On The Run, Northcott, Rainbow Signs, Barcoo Landscapes, Wicks Surf Shop, Northside Concreting, Beach Without Sand Surf Shop, Boardscape Surf Shop, O'Neill Wetsuits, *Australian Surfing World* magazine, *Tracks* magazine, the Farrell family, Vodafone, Rival swim wear, Instinct and the Wednesday Wheelie Warriors.