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W

hen the paddles slice into the cold Pacific and it draws backward through the current, my muscles strain, salty water splashes across my face, and the world disappears around me. I close my eyes and feel the energy of six bodies moving in unison to propel our outrigger canoe forward.

“Hut, hike, hoe.”

The rhythmic voice of the “caller” is not just a set of instructions for when to paddle on the right side and when to switch to the left in harmony with your other teammates; it is also a meditative chant. An impenetrable sense of calm permeates the small boat as each individual focuses inward to connect with the boat’s natural momentum. The spiritual aspect of this sport is rooted in its history: outrigger paddling originated in the Polynesian Islands and is deeply connected to their values of “family, respect and togetherness,” according to Makapo Aquatics co-founder RJ DeRama. Makapo (meaning “dark eyes” or “blind” in Hawaiian) is a paddling team for blind and visually-impaired athletes. They train from the Newport Aquatics Center in Back Bay and compete professionally against sighted teams. Though racing a 40-foot outrigger manned with five blind teammates may seem extraordinarily difficult, Makapo handles it with expert ease.

A paddling boat consists of six team members in the boat. The steersman sits in the last seat, directing the boat from right to left and warning of impending obstacles. The other five focus on paddling, propelling

the boat forward in perfect unison. With only one sighted member, the steersman, the Makapo team can still compete on a level with sighted athletes. Most members of the team actually consider their condition an advantage because they can hear and sense the paddles’ movements with much more precision than those athletes who rely on their most obvious (but less accurate) sense of sight.

How I came to know these inspiring athletes and to paddle with them on that Saturday morning is a story as profoundly turbulent as any ocean race. Growing up within the confines of Laguna Beach, my older brother Andrei and I spent our afternoons and summers running down Emerald Bay beach, playing in the waves and watching the sun go down over boxes of half-eaten Gina’s Pizza. It was on one of our nightly walks home from the beach that I noticed Andrei couldn’t see the road as well as I could. He tripped on the curb and while I snickered like a typical little sister, I think we all knew that it could be a sign of something serious. It was. Andrei was diagnosed with Retinitis Pigmentosa, a degenerative eye disease that slowly robs its victims of sight by destroying the retina. It was a slow process, but a frightening one, and Andrei did everything he could to minimize the effects and to help doctors in their research for a cure. His fight was tragically cut short in 2005 when he lost his life in an auto accident at the age of 32. In the weeks that followed his death, my family and I searched for ways to honor his life. We settled on two major endeavors: opening a restaurant and starting a charitable foundation in his name.

BY NATALIA OLENICOFF
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CAM ODEN

KEEPING H



Andrei's Conscious Cuisine & Cocktails and The Andrei Foundation were born from our grief.

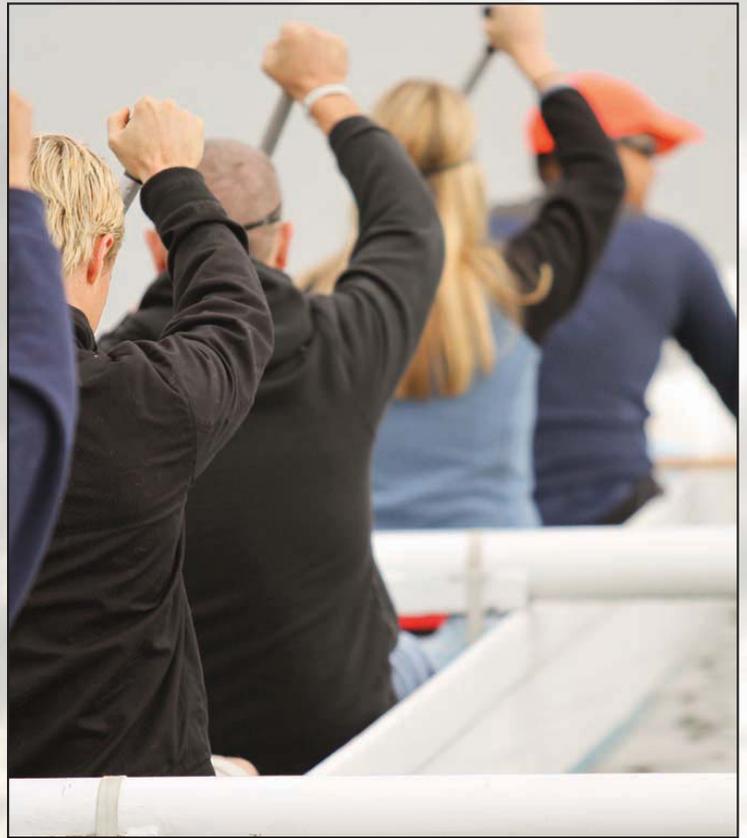
We knew we wanted the Foundation's work to support the causes that were important to Andrei, namely vision-related efforts. We had the obvious line-up that he had already been donating to - The Foundation Fighting Blindness, and other research teams at UCI and USC. We got to know some fearless and fabulous guide dog owners and through

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them began supporting Guide Dogs for the Blind. But in addition to those larger organizations, we wanted to support something more local, something grassroots. As we started to search, a friend of mine asked if I'd heard of Makapo Aquatics. The next few months were a blur of friendly emails with RJ, followed by The Andrei Foundation's first major donation to the Makapo team. Until that time they had been borrowing boats, but in order to train and compete efficiently, they needed their own. We donated the funds and the team designed and ordered two gorgeous outrigger canoes of their own. Adhering to the principles of Hawaiian tradition, they held a bayside christening ceremony and blessed this new beginning for the boats Andrei and Salsa (a college nickname for Andrei).

Since that time I have seen the Makapo team achieve many exciting milestones. They have grown to include a men's, women's and youth team. They have competed annually in Southern California's most grueling long distance race from Newport Harbor to Avalon. Unlike the cushy 26-mile cruise aboard a sport fisher, an outrigger canoe takes four to six hours of intense athleticism by eight committed teammates. As the often overwhelming swells (5-6 feet last year) catapult the canoe up

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THIS VISION ALIVE



and down, five blind or visually-impaired paddlers and one sighted steersman heave their paddles through the waves. Two paddlers are subbed in every 30 minutes and must quickly jump from the trailing power boat into the canoe without tipping it over. By way of reference, I tipped the canoe over while trying to climb into it in twofeet of still harbor water. The racing process is no easy task, and the Makapo team courageously maneuvers through it with unbelievable prowess.

In 2008, they traveled to the granddaddy of the paddling world: The Queen Liliuokalani Race, held at the beginning of September each year from Kailua to Honaunau Bay (women's teams) and back again in the same day (men's teams). To call this

feat amazing is an understatement; even traveling to Hawaii is a monumental challenge for the Makapo team, filled with busy airports, confusing bus rides, hotel check-ins, and a huge financial commitment. The drawbacks were far outweighed by the magic of the race, says DeRama. As the newness of the warm tropical surroundings overtook them, smiles erupted through the boat and they were met at the finish line with a 1200-person strong standing ovation. Tears were shed by almost all and the overwhelming pride of that moment still lingers within each team member. Kirsten Garwood, the team's ebullient coach, says they hope to offer more blind and visually-impaired people that opportunity this year and are currently seeking new participants for all teams.

Beyond the bravery of these incredible individuals, I am most struck by their attitudes. Never have I seen them curse the cold winter water or sigh at the ungodly hour of practice on Saturday mornings. Over the past few years I have come to understand that "old soul" calm in their eyes and smiles. When I climb into Andrei and join them in that harmonic paddle, closing my eyes and listening to the sound of the water and wind, I can feel Andrei sitting behind me and I feel instantly at peace.

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