

LIFE LESSONS

Intrepid Masters Swimmer Andrea Funk Pieces It All Together

by Christine Ennulat >>> Photos by Peter Bick

If you look for Andrea Funk at a swim meet or triathlon, she's the one with the quilts—T-shirt quilts, patched from an endless supply of T-shirts from athletic events, outgrown by children, cast off by teenagers, stuffed in drawers or found at local thrift shops. Funk, a Michigan

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native, operates her business, Too Cool T-Shirt Quilts, from her home in the woods around Olivet, where she lives with daughter Milie, 13, and David Johnson, her husband of one-and-a-half years.

Telling Funk's story puts one at risk of beating quilt metaphors to death. So, up front: A quilt depicting her life would have many bright colors, but some dark, a few frayed patches alongside shiny new ones, intricate designs among more simple, creative use of materials at hand—and swimming would be the thread stitching the whole.

Funk, 41, grew up swimming in East Lansing and by

the end of high school was ready to experience “the world out there that wasn't wet.” So she quit swimming and went to college...“and went to college and went to college.” After completing an undergraduate degree in communication, a master's in rhetorical theory and a stint with the National Guard, she completed another master's degree in graphic design and, from there, “jumped right out into the recession of the early '90s,” she recalls. But Funk moved on, earning credentials as a Chartered Property Casualty Underwriter, finishing the five-year program in three.

Meanwhile, she had also married, had Milie in 1992, divorced, landed a new job in East Lansing and, in her own words, become “heavy and fat.”

In 1996, near finishing the CPCU program, she remembers thinking, “I can do anything I want.” So she treated herself to a return to swimming. Her new job offered passes to a nearby fitness club, and she began swimming at lunchtime.

Once she finished the underwriting program in 1997, Funk joined Capital Area Triathlon and Swim (CATS), a USMS team with members from across the state, and started swimming every night. As the





Working from home affords Andrea more flexible time for pool workouts and quality time with her husband, David Johnson, and teenage daughter, Milie.



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exercise regimen increased her stamina and confidence, Funk's creative side was percolating as she discovered a new side of quilting.

"I started making quilts to humor my sister," says Funk, of her triathlete sibling, Karen Copeland. "She shows up at my house one day with a bag full of T-shirts and says, 'I hear people make quilts out of these things.'" It was a new challenge for Funk, who had been quilting since childhood.

Stretchy T-shirts are not typical quilting fabric, so Funk spent a month working out the problem, "thinking outside the box," she says, "or not going into the box to begin with." She still uses the method she created then: multiple-size templates, nothing between the blocks, no backing on the shirts.

Soon she was making quilts for her sister's friends, five or six a year, and earning a little cash. So Funk began joining

Copeland at triathlons, bringing along fliers and quilts, "...and I saw these triathletes having fun," she recalls. She quickly calculated that selling the quilts would provide funds for the hefty entry fees she'd incur as a triathlon competitor. Other swim meets offered further marketing opportunities. By 1996, she was making 12 quilts a year, then 15, then 20. Her customers pretty much named the business for her, she says. "When people would see the quilts, they'd always say, 'Oh! That's too cool!'"

So Funk worked, raised her daughter, quilted and swam. As her coaches pushed, she improved, developing particular strengths in distance and backstroke. In summer 1998, she got hooked on open water swimming at a two-mile swim in Half Moon Lake (the Pizza Man race sponsored by Domino's). "I got out there and I couldn't see! There was

something in the water, and it took maybe an hour to clear my eyes so I could go home," she recalls with a laugh. For her, it was simply part of the adventure. "Still, I won my age group and I had fun. I thought, 'Man, I like this!'"

Every open water event became an adventure, some more than others. "Most people think of swimming as a flat sport, but I've been to some really hilly open water swims," Funk notes. She particularly remembers a two-miler a couple of years ago in Cleveland, with 6- to 8-foot swells. "You're swimming along all by yourself, thinking, 'Where is everybody?' Then, all of a sudden, a wave would change and there would be six people on top of you."

A two-mile swim across the Mississippi is how Funk capped the 1999 USMS Long Course National Championships in Minneapolis, where she won the 1500, the last event on the last day. After a big meet, most

people go out and suspend the training diet for a night. Not Funk.

"The moment I touched the wall at that last event, the woman I was going [to swim the Mississippi] with said, 'OK, you won, let's go.' We got on a bus and an hour-and-a-half

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later we were swimming across the Mississippi," Funk relates. It's a favorite memory. "There was this beautiful sunset, and when we stopped to rest, I looked at [my friend] and I thought, 'I don't know this woman.' She had all this facial hair...and then I realized it was silt!" she laughs. "It was a blast."

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In 2001, Funk was named Long Distance All-American. “It has a lot to do with the fact that she’s like the Energizer bunny,” says CATS teammate and good friend Paul Chaffee (he has a T-shirt quilt). “She can

Funk is blithe about her accolades, even her world record in a 3 x 10,000 meter race, in which she never saw the other two women in the relay. “How many times a week I get into the pool matters more than that record.”

go and go and never wear out.”

Wally Dobler, another friend and sometime coach, characterizes Funk as “a world-class long-distance swimmer...a *very* good distance swimmer—keeps the same pace all the time.” Dobler, who’s 71 and a multiple record holder himself, pauses then adds, “But I can beat her in a sprint!”

Funk is blithe about her accolades, even her world record in a 3 x 10,000 meter race, in which she never saw the other two women in the relay. “That’s my world record, which I have because only Americans do this,” she says. “How many times a week I get into the pool matters more

than that record,” she observes. “I’ll get records when I’m old, because I’ll have outlived everyone!”

When Funk has an ulterior motive, she admits it freely: Newly single when she returned to swimming, she was kind of hoping to meet a guy. At the 1999 nationals in Minneapolis in August, she met USMS swimmer Larry Nyman, a financial planner from St. Paul, Minn., and things moved along quickly. They married the following March, Funk found a great job in medical malpractice insurance, Milie (then 8) joined them in June—and Nyman died in August, 10 days after a massive stroke. He was 47. “I can’t tell you how bizarre it was,” Funk says now. “You feel your world slipping away from you.”

Soon after, Funk and her daughter moved back home to East Lansing, and she took another insurance job, “not my dream job,” she says. “I was just working to survive, and exercising like a fiend so I could get through the grief.... Exercise is always good to take the mind off things—when you’re hurting, you’re not thinking about your grief, you’re thinking about how you’re hurting.”

Eating held little interest, and Funk’s weight dropped to 115, low for her 5’5” frame. Still, it felt good to reconnect with her old friends in CATS. “Sometimes you only see these folks once, twice or three times a year, but they’re still your friends,” she notes. That support group helped keep her from disappearing, and she began to heal.

In June 2001, Funk got to know David Johnson, a USMS swimmer she’d met several years earlier through biking. Their first date was a two-mile swim in Grand Haven, Mich., from a pier to a park, with friend Dobler as chapter-one. “Wally stretched out in the back seat and tried to ignore us,” she laughs. During the ride home, Funk tried to set Johnson up with another

girlfriend and “kept talking about my dead husband, and it didn’t deter him one bit.”

In August 2002, Johnson proposed to her on a tandem bike as they crossed the five-mile Mackinac Bridge, with 300 riders on the fourth day of the 300-plus-mile DALMAC (Dick Allen Lansing to Mackinac) ride. Funk explains that when many riders are following in close succession, those in the lead warn of what’s ahead: “Slowing... slowing... bump... bump....”

“He turned around with a ring in his hand and said, ‘Will you marry me?’

“Well, *yeah!*”

“Proposing!... Proposing!...”

They married in June 2003 and moved to Johnson’s home in Olivet, where he works as an engineer. Funk chose to work at home as Milie began to navigate adolescence, and now Too Cool T-Shirt Quilts is a full-time operation. The purchase of a long-arm quilting machine, which, along with word of mouth and her web site (www.toocooltshirtquilts.com), has brought exponential growth. In 2003, she made about 70 quilts, and in 2004, 100.

Swimming initially took a backseat after the move because the nearest pool was far away. But Olivet has great biking roads, perfect for Funk to break in her new recumbent bicycle, a.k.a. Human Powered Vehicle, which Johnson had custom-built for her. Because riders of ’bents are almost lying down, it’s “like learning to ride that first bike all over again,” says Funk. “They go *really* fast—David can go 55 mph downhill.” Johnson, an avid HPV rider, races his bike “Great White” at events around the Midwest (www.wisil.recumbents.com/wisil/racing2002/michigan-pictures-2002.htm). Funk goes along—and brings the quilts.

“Swimming ebbs and flows around my life...,” she says, “but it’ll always be part of my life.” In fact, Funk began swimming with a team again early this

ANDREA FUNK’S OPEN WATER SWIMMING TIPS

Start simply. A good first step is a one-mile swim in a smaller inland lake. The water is colder and waves can be much bigger in big lakes or ocean swims. “Go looking to have fun,” Funk suggests. “Have a picnic. Make a day of it.”

Learn how to sight on targets. Practice in the pool using an orange cone at one end. “Swim with your eyes closed, then pick up your head and find the cone immediately. Keep your body in line with that. If you swim a mile-and-a-half on your first mile swim, that’s no big deal.”

Practice going around buoys. Corkscrew around them—roll onto the back, then onto the stomach, Funk advises.

Practice entry and exit. At the beach or a pool with a ramp, run into and out of the water a few times. “When you come out of an open water swim, you’re usually dizzy—realize that’s how you’ll feel, and make sure your body knows what to do.”

Use smoked, mirrored goggles. “Without them, forget it, especially on morning swims. I never swim outdoors without them.”

year when a new pool opened in a nearby community. It's a kids' team, but that suits Funk just fine. "Swimming by myself just doesn't work for me. I need somebody telling me, 'Go faster! Work harder!'" And this time, Milie is at her side. "She wants to be a triathlete," says Funk, "and the best triathletes are swimmers."

Friend Chaffee describes Funk's life over the eight years he's known her in three phases: finding out who she is, surviving tragedy and finding happiness. "She's made the best of everything that's come by, and I think that has to do with her attitude," he says.

Funk simply marvels. "I have this strange background, but it all works perfectly for what I'm doing. It all comes together in ways you wouldn't expect."

"I'm as happy as can be. Where did all this *come* from?" <<<

