

# HEALING WATERS

Two Swimmers, Two Stories of Survival

by Cari Parven

**T**otal submersion in water has been compared to getting a massage—water has the incredible ability to soothe and calm. For that reason, water is also a powerful form of therapy and an effective tool for recovery from physical setbacks such as an illness or an accident.

Cari Parven is a freelance writer in the Washington, D.C., area and a Masters swimmer with the Montgomery County Ancient Mariners in Bethesda, Md. She is a frequent contributor to *The Washington Post* and has written for *Cooking Light*, *Sports Weekly* and *American Fitness Magazine*.

Water has an “amazing calming effect because it brings us back to where we started in the womb,” says Natalie King, a physical therapist who special-

izes in aquatic therapy at Quince Orchard Medical Center in Rockville, Md. “Often patients who cannot find pain relief in regular physical therapy find great success with aquatic therapy,” she says.

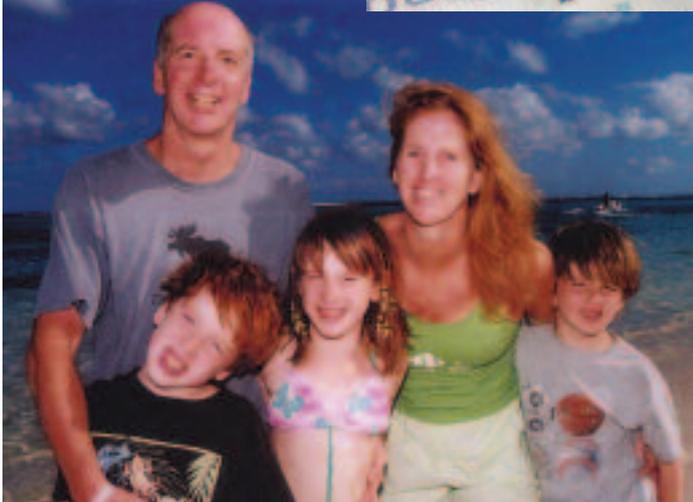
No one needs to tell Karen

Farnsworth Einsidler or Mike Shaffer about the healing effects of water. These Masters swimmers—Einsidler in New Jersey and Shaffer in California—each suffered physical adversity, and with great determination, each came back even stronger. The



David Balch

Backstroke and world record setter **KAREN EINSIDLER** is a breast cancer survivor who found inspiration in swimming—and strength from her teammates (right) and family (below)—during her fight and recovery.

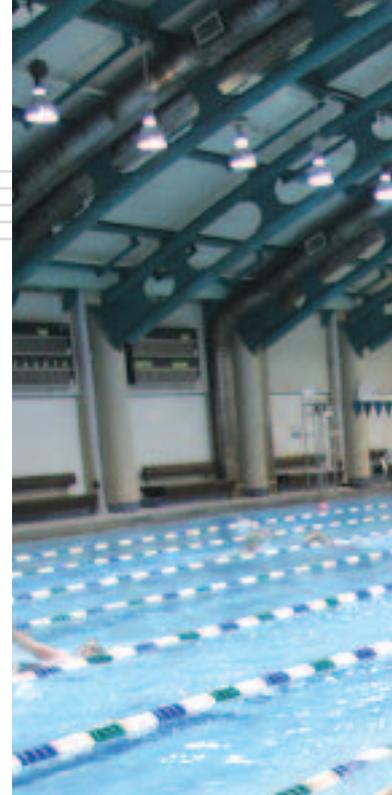


pool, they both say, was *there* for them.

For Shaffer, 40, a cycling accident when he was 29 literally threw him off his athletic path. For Einsidler, 50, it was cancer.

## EINSIDLER'S STORY

In early May 1997, after some fertility setbacks, Einsidler was flying high. At 42, she had just found out that she was pregnant—wonderful news for the lawyer and her husband, who met while swimming laps at the Asphalt Green pool in New York





David Baich

City. (She was in the fast lane; he was in the slow lane—“a geeky triathlete she wouldn’t talk to,” claims her husband, Jon). Later that month, Einsidler, who lives in Tenafly, N.J., found out that “the baby” was actually triplets. “Thrilling” news, she recalls. Seven months later, swimming up until the day her water broke, Einsidler gave birth to Nina, Scott and Teddy.

But in July 2004, when she was 48, the days of joy that had filled Einsidler’s calendar for six years took a negative turn. A mammogram signaled trouble. “Almost every year since 1999, when I had some precancerous lumps removed, I had to be checked. And each time I was scared to death that they would find it. Then they found *it*,” she

recounts. As cancer specialist poked and prodded her body looking for the trouble spots, Einsidler was swimming and winning championships. The swimming kept her focused. The winning kept her confident.

There was the USMS one-mile open water national championship victory in June 2004, followed by a win at the 10K open water national championship in July. But that same month, her second-place win in the 5K postal was overshadowed by devastating news that she had full-fledged breast cancer.

Her calendar filled with surgery dates, but Einsidler doggedly kept to her swimming schedule too. Two mornings a week, she worked out with Asphalt Green Masters in Manhattan



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### Karen Einsidler Quick Stats

- 2004 USMS Long Distance All-Star
- 2004 USMS Long Distance and Pool All-American
- First-place (40-44) USMS One-Mile Open Water Championships 2004
- First-place (40-44) USMS 10K Open Water Championships 2004
- Second-place (40-44) USMS 10K Postal Championships 2004
- Second-place (40-44) USMS 5K Postal Championships 2004
- First-place (40-44) USMS 3000-yard Postal Championships 2004
- 2002 USMS Pool All-Star
- 12 USMS All-American rankings, 1987-1997
- English Channel crossing, Sept. 1, 1987, 11 hours, 17 minutes

**“Mike’s knees were so devastated that he wasn’t able to move on gravity so well. In the water, he was able to regain the motion he lost on land. The exercises I gave him, like water jogging, helped him to regain the motion because it was like jogging on air with resistance.”**

before heading downtown to her job at Guardian Life Insurance Co. Another day each week, she headed uptown to swim at Columbia University, and on a fourth day, she swam at a local pool near home. She also continued to fit swim meets into her calendar. Sadly, Einsidler’s victories in the pool were followed by personal disappointments in the doctor’s office. At this same time, her father was dying of prostate cancer. “Swimming was my outlet, my sanity,” she says.

Soon after her first surgery, Einsidler’s elation at winning the 10K postal championship was dampened by the news that she would need another surgery. Then, that second surgery failed too. “The second surgery didn’t get it all. They just kept finding it,” she recalls. The swimming continued, but so too did the demoralizing medical diagnoses. None of the surgeries were ridding her body of the cancer. Einsidler was told that she would have to put her swimming on hold and endure a double mastectomy.

Her calendar, and her heart, told her otherwise. The 3,000-yard postal was coming up, and she was determined to swim, even though recovering from the previous surgeries had taken their toll on her training regimen. Nevertheless, it was a challenge she wanted to face. “I have to do more postal events to be an All-Star,” she recalls reasoning. She decided that the radical surgery would wait a few weeks and set about reconditioning herself to swim the event. Einsidler attacked the race knowing that one

month later, both her breasts and, hopefully all of the cancer, would be removed. Shortly after Einsidler grabbed gold, a double mastectomy saved her life.

It was two months before Einsidler—who did meet her goal of becoming a 2004 USMS Long Distance All-Star—would get back in the water. Being named an All-Star was “one of my greatest accomplishments because of what I was going through. It ranks right up there with my world records and swimming the English Channel,” says Einsidler, who was cancer-free by October 2004.

Then came the reconstruction. Einsidler was slowed once again as doctors prepared her body for implants. She tried to ignore the pain as injections of saline into temporary implants pushed on the muscles in her chest. “I was swimming well, but I was in pain,” she notes. So, Einsidler made a mental turn and began focusing on the long-term goal of preparing her surgery-wracked body for competing in the August 2006 World Championships.

Her recovery was swift as she pushed herself through the pain, using the water as her therapy. “I needed to be doing something, I needed to get back in the pool,” she relates. At first she just kicked. The she added one arm. “Just used one arm so that I wouldn’t use my chest muscles. I left one arm by my side and did a couple of thousand [yards] that way. Then I added fins swimming very easy and rotating with the fins.” Eventually she made it back into her lane and began drafting off of lane buddies. Friends who



Pete Erickson

once forced her to carry her weight and lead some of the sets now didn’t mind that she drafted—they just wanted the swimming to help her get better.

“The doctors were amazed with my range of motion and they thought it was from the swimming,” Einsidler says of her recovery. “While they didn’t provide me with physical therapy, I’m convinced that the swimming and weight training I was doing was my own form of physical therapy.”

The swimming became a form of emotional therapy as well. “Swimming has been a part of my life for so long,” she notes. “You get to zone out and mentally relax. I wanted to get myself

back and getting back in the water was part of getting myself back.”

Swimming, which had always brought Einsidler joy, became a powerful anchor, according to John Silva, professor of sport psychology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. “It brought positivity into her life since the activity was part of her core identity,” he says. “When everything else was disintegrating around her, it was almost a way to grab on to a rope and pull her back up.”

Then there was another kind of therapy, the kind that Einsidler credits as the most powerful motivator of all, the therapy that comes with being the member of a team—camaraderie. “My

teammates...were so supportive. It's a pool relationship, but you feel like you know these people better than other people. There's some connection, I don't know what it is. Without them, it would have been much harder."

"When you have a trauma," says Silva, "sometimes the role of social support becomes extremely important, even unexpected support."

Einsidler recalls all the cards the team signed. Her husband would bring them home after practices she couldn't attend. Then there was the gift of a Milagro breast cancer necklace that teammates pitched in to buy her. And to boost her spirits, the Victoria Secret lingerie.

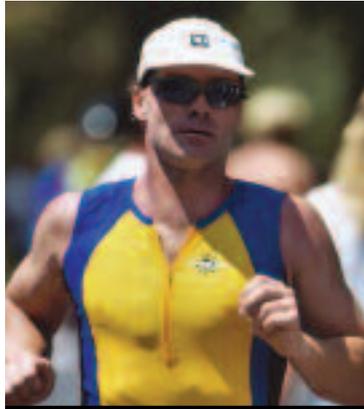
"If I make it back, it will be because of my team," she says.

### SHAFFER'S STORY

Across the country in California, Mike Shaffer has made it back after his near-fatal cycling accident in 1994. He made it back to the pool, across the finish line to claim many triathlon awards, down a wedding aisle and into the delivery room for the birth of his now 9-year-old daughter. Shaffer, who also has two grown stepchildren, is a grandfather, too.

The Ventura County Masters swimmer knows that, without a doubt, it was swimming that helped him walk again and brought him this bounty. After all, if he hadn't recovered so successfully, he would never have met his triathlete wife at a local triathlon training class. "She didn't like me," says Shaffer. "I would always show up late. She had a babysitter for her two kids and I would hold up the group." He made up for his tardiness, wooed her, but never fully corrected the problem. "I was late for my own wedding, but the minister was even later," he jokes.

Like so many triathletes, Shaffer swam throughout childhood and in college, and eventually fell into triathlon competition. His first experience was with a friend in a relay triathlon.



Hit by a drunk driver in 1994 while training on his bike, swimmer and triathlete **MIKE SHAFFER** used swimming as a key component of his recovery from multiple injuries that included shattered knees, a broken foot and a severed quad.

"I was the swimmer. But my friend threw out his back so I had to do the bike portion, too. I was 25 and I couldn't stand up after the cycling. I was stuck in the race position," he recalls.

Despite the backache, cycling, and then running, became part of Shaffer's regimen. He started swimming Masters, too, after a poor showing at Long Course Nationals in the early 1990s that heightened his resolve.

Shaffer was a full-fledged triathlete by 1994, the year that a drunk driver almost took his life. Cycling with a friend on a September training ride after having just run a 5K race, "a Ford Escort took us out head-on," recalls Shaffer, an environmental engineer. "I remember seeing the grill of the car right in front of me. I tried to jump in the air. The hood of the car sliced right above my knee, and then I went into the windshield and did some ragdoll flips." He remembers thinking to himself, "this isn't good," as he flew over the car.

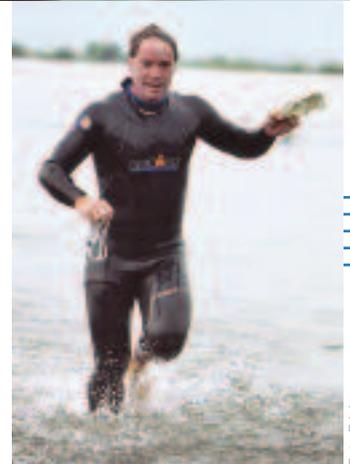
Shaffer suffered a severed left quad, knees that needed to be rebuilt and a broken right foot, not to mention the bruises and lacerations he endured as he flip-turned his way over the car, with his bike rebounding off of him.

Ever determined and fiercely competitive, "three months later



I was back in the pool making one-legged open turns and dragging my legs behind me with the help of pull-buoys," he says. Shaffer credits keeping an open mind and returning to the pool for his swift recovery. "I think that I was able to recover a lot better because of the good condition I was in, and because of the swimming."

According to aquatic therapy specialist King, "The hydrostatic pressure of water is incredible. If you have swelling, it pushes



### Mike Shaffer Quick Stats

Mike Shaffer received the USA Triathlon's Comeback Award in 1995. Since then he's brought home many medals in swimming and triathlons. His accomplishments in 2005 include:

- First place (35-39) and second place overall, USMS One Hour Postal Championships
- Six gold medals (35-39) and two national records in 100-yard fly (0:52.16) and 200-yard fly (1:56.12), YMCA National Swimming Championships
- Three national titles (35-39), 200-yard fly, 500-yard free, 1650-yard free, USMS Short Course National Swimming Championships
- Seven first-place finishes (40-44) and high point honors, Pacific Swimming Long Course Championships
- Two national titles (40-44), 200-meter fly and 800-meter free, USMS Long Course Nationals
- Second-place (40-44) and third overall, Carpinteria Sprint Triathlon

it away from the extremities, away from the injured areas." She doesn't doubt the role that water played in Shaffer's recovery.

Shaffer also focused on the small goals he set for himself, first on land, then in the water. "Get out of the wheelchair, then get rid of the walker then chuck the crutches," and then back in the water was his mantra.

"His whole life had been the pool," says Terry Weyman, Shaffer's sports chiropractor at Chiropractic Sports Institute in Westlake Village, Calif. "Put a fish back in water, that's where he felt the best. [Mike's] knees were so devastated that he wasn't

able to move on gravity so well. In the water, he was able to regain the motion he lost on land. The exercises I gave him, like water jogging, helped him to regain the motion because it was like jogging on air with resistance," says Weyman. "In swimming I could keep testing the other parts of my body, my upper body, while the other parts were healing up," Shaffer says. "I was determined. I kept setting goals: 40-second 50s today. It refreshed me. I think it helped to light a fire again. Every week I was trying a new challenge."

Sports psychologist Silva comments that Shaffer was wise to

set realistic goals. "His small goals helped him measure whether he was successful. He made the goals, creating a pretty good set of motivations for himself."

Four months after Shaffer's accident, he did the USMS One Hour swim. "I was swimming almost 100 percent with my upper body. The kicking wasn't the same, but I was able to do two-legged flip turns," he recounts.

Ten months after the accident, Shaffer took part in Iron Man Canada. He set a personal record and a race record for the swim portion of the event. His 2.4-mile swim in 43:54 still stands today. He was awarded USA Triathlon's Comeback Award for his remarkable recovery. Shaffer also won gold and silver medals at the 1994 FINA Masters World Championships in Montreal.

"I kept a positive outlook and didn't give up," says Shaffer of his recovery. "It may take time, but stick with it," he advises others who may be coming back from an illness or accident.

These days, with a family that happily steals away some of his practice time, Shaffer swims 15,000 to 20,000 meters a week. "I have to share the time with my wife, so I can only swim Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday. She gets Monday and Thursday. We also take turns with cycling—I get Saturday, she gets Sunday. We fit the running in around the schedule."

When he's not moving, he's thinking. "We're a very competitive family and we like to watch Jeopardy and Wheel of Fortune and compete to see who gets the answer first," he says.

But he doesn't sit still for long. In fact, since the accident, Shaffer has had other minor setbacks including a ruptured appendix, a broken collar bone (from another cycling accident) and knee trouble, which resulted in surgery. As with the first bike accident, Shaffer says, "I used swimming to get back. By all estimates swimming brought me back." <<<

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