

Swimming Life



Patricia Sener with a carload of supplies for Superstorm Sandy victims.



Denise Stapely

Real Life Meets Reality Show

In two very different ways, last year proved that swimmers are survivors. First, when Hurricane Sandy tried her best to destroy large swaths of New York and New Jersey, USMS members stepped up to save their communities, despite their own losses. Second, although it is a manmade challenge, being a contestant on “Survivor” requires a special blend of physical and mental toughness, as a pair of Masters swimmers showed the world.

Here are the survival stories of three very different swimmers, showing us the diversity and deep connectedness that exists in our sport. In the end, one swimmer battled both Sandy and “Survivor,” another won a million dollars, and a third is still living in a disaster zone but moving forward. Here are their stories.

SURVIVING SANDY

Hurricane Sandy was “absolutely devastating for the tri-state area,” says Roberta St. Amour, 27, and a member of Red Tide, in the Metropolitan LMSC. “We were vastly unprepared for a natural disaster of that scope. The water was the issue; salt water corroded everything.” In fact, when *SWIMMER* interviewed

St. Amour several weeks after the storm, her apartment building in Manhattan was still operating on generators.

St. Amour, who goes by RC, was voted in as chair of the Metropolitan LMSC on October 28, 2012, the day Sandy hit New York City. Using her diverse skill set, St. Amour dove right into problem-solving mode. Swimming was out of the question for weeks; not only were pools flooded, but there was so much work to do just to get the necessities of life back. “When I finally got back in the water, it made me feel so normal. I think that is why we are so dedicated to our sport,” St. Amour says.

She wanted to give that feeling of normalcy and a safe

place to escape the disaster to her LMSC swimmers as quickly as possible and worked tirelessly to do so. A lot of people wanted to help, too. St. Amour says she especially appreciated “the offer from the Louisiana/Mississippi [Southern] LMSC to grant us \$2,000 to repair any damaged programs since they know first-hand what hurricanes can do.” Yet, even as she worked to rally the swimming community, she had to postpone the upcoming Metropolitan SCM championships. “It was devastating to make that call.” But it felt right, she said, and “I looked at the marathon decision as to whether we should hold the meet.”



ON THE FRONTLINES

While St. Amour had her hands full with difficult administrative issues, Coney Island Brighton Beach Open Water Swimmers founder Patricia Sener lost “both her home and her training ground” in the storm. Coney Island and Brighton Beach, where CIBBOWS swimmers regularly gather to train, were devastated. But Sener rallied the troops; the CIBBOWS Facebook page turned into information central after Sandy, and CIBBOWS swimmers organized two beach clean-ups that first weekend. “It was shocking to realize you couldn’t even see the sand,” says Sener.

The next weekend, “we felt the need to do something on a more human scale,” she explains. So CIBBOWS folks organized a food delivery program to the residents of the projects in the poorer sections of Coney Island. “We had stair runners, taking hot meals up dark stairwells of the high rise buildings. This was the first hot meal some people had received in two weeks,” explains CIBBOWS member Capri Djatiasmoro.

Sener spearheaded a lot of the early effort from CIBBOWS, but soon realized she had to take



care of her own needs; she was homeless. Fellow CIBBOWS swimmer Cristian Vergara was one of the first to offer his home, and many other CIBBOWS swimmers stepped up too. By late December, Sener was back in her home, but noted the air and water were still very polluted by the storm. “The sea is still not the color it is supposed to be.” The CIBBOWS open water swims and races will go on in 2013, though. “We didn’t lose our kayaks,” Sener says with glee.

SURVIVING “SURVIVOR”

Although it was no hurricane and a world away from the Northeast, St. Amour and eventual winner Denise Stapley had to battle the elements and the people on “Survivor: The Philippines,” an experience they both describe as amazing and exhausting.

WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE

St. Amour admits her life was great training for this “Survivor.” (Of course, “Survivor” ended up being great training for Sandy, too. Ironically, the show, which filmed from March through May 2012, ran in the fall, with many episodes airing when New Yorkers had no power to watch

their friend, leader, and fellow swimmer.) A beach lifeguard growing up, St. Amour says she was “used to sitting in the rain.” That ended up being an important skill since “it rained for the first 17 days of filming. You know you will be surviving the elements as well as the people, but I never thought it would rain that long.”

An investment banker who swam the English Channel as part of a relay with her family in 2008, St. Amour decided to focus on the physical challenges; she learned to spearfish with her dad, and together they slept outside on the beach in Long Island. She used her swimming as part of her strategy as well. “Whenever I needed to get away and clear my head, I could swim laps. To be able to swim and feel good about myself was wonderful.”

An original member of the Tandang tribe, St. Amour was voted off in episode 7. If you don’t speak the language of



Roberta St. Amour

“Survivor,” suffice it to say that winning is tricky and losing is no badge of shame. St. Amour has no specific plans for the future, but says, “I thrive on adventure. Something will come up.”

A “STUBBORN, DETERMINED WOMAN”

That’s how Denise Stapley, of Iowa Masters, describes herself. This Masters swimmer, who won the 25th season of “Survivor,” says her victory was a combination of the physical and the mental. Although St. Amour is a lifelong swimmer, Stapley’s journey to Masters swimming started with a sprint triathlon in 2009. Stapley and St. Amour were in different tribes, and although they interacted on the show, there was no time to bond over sets and drills and chlorinated pools. “I just think it was great there were two Masters swimmers in the show,” Stapley says.

Stapley, 42, knew she needed to work on her swimming to progress in triathlon and found her way to Milky Way Masters in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. She doesn’t like to lead in practices. “I make a great follower,” she says. That strategy served her well on her way to winning “Survivor.” You can’t keep an eye on the other players when you’re out in front. Echoing St. Amour, Stapley says the incessant rain was the hardest part. In addition, the day-to-day fatigue was harder than the challenges (competitions between the cast

members) for which she says adrenaline kicked in.

Stapley started with the Matsing tribe and moved to Kalabaw; as such, she ended up at every single tribal council. Fans of the show know that surviving that many votes takes a strong person, some luck, and a good strategy. “It played out,” Stapley says of her two-page, strategy that focused on the social aspects of the game. “Luckily, I didn’t piss off a lot of people,” she says with a self-deprecating laugh. In addition, she says she chose to serve as the camp workhorse and always did well in challenges, even if she didn’t win.

Stapley says her time on “Survivor” probably made her “a bit more willing to take risks.” Her goals for the future include reestablishing a routine and trying the new mud run craze.

LESSONS

The perseverance Sener learned in her open water swims helped her survive Sandy and the even more difficult aftermath. “The idea that this discomfort or pain will end is key,” says the veteran of an icy double Beagle Channel crossing. “And if it doesn’t, you just have to adjust.”

St. Amour expressed similar sentiments, and Stapley says she dealt with the physical trials of “Survivor” by telling herself to “dig in, dig deep.” That’s probably a good mantra for getting through just about anything life throws at you, in or out of the water.—LAURA S. JONES



Top photo: Monty Brinton/CBS; Bottom left photo: Courtesy of CBS.