



Among other feats, Kim Chambers is the first woman to swim from the Farallon Islands to San Francisco.

Silicon Valley's

# Hall of Fame Swimmer

**F**OR TWO YEARS, KIM CHAMBERS ENDURED DAY AFTER PAINFUL day of therapy trying to regain the ability to walk. It was an ordeal she wouldn't wish upon anyone, an ordeal she would never want to repeat.

And yet.

"My injury was the best thing that ever happened to me," she says.

Silver-lining stories are vital just now. Our need to believe that some good will emerge from the awful toll of the coronavirus is reflected in the world's unofficial motto of recovery--build back better. Rallying behind that phrase, business and political leaders are promising a post-pandemic world of greater equality, deeper concern for the environment, wider access to better healthcare.

Yet the Kim Chambers story raises a question: Why limit our hopes to outcomes we can envision? Ms. Chambers started swimming in the hope that it would help her walk again, never imagining that she would become a legend of the sport. Perhaps we ought to keep our eyes open for unanticipated junctures. "I have had the great fortune of plumbing the depths of a sense of self that did not exist ten years ago, five years ago or even a year ago," she writes on her blog.

Ms. Chambers could serve as a role model for

the many adults who cling to fantasies of athletic glory—F. Scott Fitzgerald dreamed of quarterbacking the Princeton football team long after he became a world-famous writer—except that she never longed for aquatic glory. At age 30, she was an up-and-comer in Silicon Valley, the holder of two degrees from the University of California at Berkeley, including a Masters in information management with an emphasis in computer/human interaction. She'd come a long way from the New Zealand sheep farm where'd she'd grown up. "I was very much the corporate woman—high heels and all," she wrote on her blog. "I made enough money to think I was invincible."

Then one day while hurrying to an appointment she tripped on her high heels and fell. She awoke in the hospital, where a surgeon told her good news—he'd barely avoided the necessity of amputating her leg—and bad: She had a 1% chance of ever walking unassisted. She was suffering from Acute Compartment Syndrome,

in which swollen tissue and internal bleeding create destructive pressure. "My life as I knew it was over," she says.

She did not think about building back better her career in Silicon Valley. A former ballerina, college rower and all-around fitness fanatic, she thought about proving her doctors wrong. "Something

**She entered the water hoping to regain her mobility. She became a record-breaking aquatic marathoner. By CRAIG MULLANEY**

inside of me decided this prediction was unacceptable. I didn't know how or when, but I was determined to prove all the doctors wrong," she later wrote on her website. As she told the Brunswick Review, "Not a single time did my doctors discourage me. They were my biggest supporters and fans when I did prove them wrong."

She was encouraged to try swimming at a local pool. Neither the horrific scars on her legs nor her lack of swimming proficiency stopped her from showing up. Weightless in water, she discovered she could move in it as she hadn't moved in two years. "It was pure magic. I felt free for the first time in years," she wrote.

A larger revelation occurred when she accepted an invitation to swim in the 53-degree waters of San Francisco Bay. So-called open water swimming requires a high tolerance for lack of control. Visibility is limited, the temperature frigid, and progress sometimes thwarted by wind, waves and currents. Ms. Chambers loved it.

In the months and years that followed, this aquatic neophyte evolved into one of the world's most accomplished marathon swimmers. In 2015, she became the first woman to complete the 30-mile swim across frigid and shark-infested waters from the Farallon Islands to San Francisco. "There's no way that I would attempt that swim. It's too cold, too challenging. It's just tough. I'm not in that 1% of 1%. I can't even say it's like the Mount Everest of our sport. It's something beyond that; it's like the Mount Everest on the North Pole in the middle of the Pacific," says Steve Munatones, Founder of the World Open Water Swimming Association.

A year earlier, she became the third woman (and sixth human) to complete seven round-the-world channel swims known as the Oceans Seven. She won induction in the International Marathon Swimming Hall of Fame. Vito Biella, an entrepreneur and founder of an elite open-water group called Night Train Swimmers, says, "Kim went from a beginner to a good swimmer in two years, in the next four or five years she made her mark and belongs in the league of all-time greats."

Her transformation from disabled accident survivor to world-renowned athlete prompted her employer, Adobe, to give her a new assignment as an inspirational speaker. That led eventually to Ms. Chambers leaving Adobe for a career in public speaking. In the midst of writing and editing a memoir, Ms. Chambers took time out to talk with the Brunswick Review.

**In 2016, you attempted what would have been the longest solo swim ever accomplished by a woman, in the Sacramento River. As I read about it, what amazed me was how you fell short of the goal—and yet climbed into the boat expressing pure joy.**

That's the only swim where the photo of me getting out of the water is me grinning ear to ear. I was elated. I did fall short. But when I climbed out of the water that day, I could put my hand on my heart and say, "I did all that I could do that was within my control." The winds had kicked up. They were over 25 knots. For a solo swim, you really need the winds to be well under ten knots. If you've done all that's in your control, then it can become kind of intoxicating to surrender yourself to nature, to the sea, to the river, whatever might happen. I didn't see it as a failure at all.

**Afterward, there wasn't any internal voice saying, "Maybe you could have gone further"?**

I didn't hear that voice. Being a marathon swimmer, you don't have a personal coach. You don't have all the amenities that come with being a high-paid professional athlete. Nobody's cracking the whip to get you up at 4 in the morning. You have to do it for yourself. For all of my swims, I had a training plan. And I followed it to the T. If you do that, then throughout the process you must combine it with an acceptance that Mother Nature is the boss. When I follow a plan, I follow it meticulously, because I know that I am the sort of person who would kick myself and say, "Well, you remember that time, two weeks ago? You shouldn't've stayed up that late."

We live in a very curated world, with social media and whatnot, and it is a world that celebrates only success. But there is so much to be learned, to be gained, from failure. I had what some people may deem a failure in my early days of open water swimming. I was going to England to do an English Channel relay swim. There are six swimmers. You swim an hour on, five hours off. A friend of mine who had swum the English Channel said, "You're going to England. You're paying all this money to go there. Why don't you do a solo during the same trip?" In my naivete, I said, "I'm going to do that."

I managed to get a boat pilot. I told my swimming community here in San Francisco that I was going to swim the English Channel, and people were horrified. They knew I had no business attempting





## "I'M LEARNING THAT THERE IS BRAVERY IN CHOOSING NOT TO DO SOMETHING YOU COULD DO."

a solo swim across the English Channel. On my part, it wasn't coming from a place of arrogance. Just naivete, being cavalier and thinking, "I can do it." I'd done all these relays and I wanted to do something solo. I wanted to see what I was capable of doing.

So I did the relay. And a few days later, I'm in the English Channel again. I swam for about seven hours, and I wasn't even halfway across the channel. These swims are timed with the tidal movements, and you want to make sure that, based on your swim speed, you are approaching France with an incoming tide. For me, time was ticking over. I was not doing very well. I was pretty tired and pretty spent.

The boat captain ended the swim. I was hauled on the boat. I was so ashamed. I was so disappointed in myself, even though I knew that I hadn't done the training required.

I sort of came back to San Francisco with my tail between my legs. But it didn't take long before the experience lit a fire. I decided that I was going to return to the English Channel. But I was going to return to the English Channel as prepared as I possibly could, all the while knowing that Mother Nature is the final decider. I came back, a few years later, to do the English Channel, and it was the easiest of all my swims. I was gifted with sunny skies and perfect wind conditions. It was a fabulous swim for me.

**It's striking to me that when you awoke in the hospital, you weren't focused on returning with a vengeance to Silicon Valley, your focus wasn't on hitting a grand slam in business or technology.**

For me the physical goal took precedence. My identity had been stripped from me. I was a medical patient. Any vision I'd had for myself was shattered by this new reality. I'd been a ballerina for 15 years. I wanted to move again.

When the surgeon said, "We saved your leg. But we don't know what, if any, functionality you'll ever have," the hammer fell, and it felt like a life sentence of being disabled. I didn't want that for myself. And I know we don't all get to choose that.

I did return to tech. I worked at Adobe from 2010 (three years after the accident) to 2019. And those nine years at Adobe were incredible. It's unusual to get an employer who understands the holistic view of an employee. As I began to explore this sense of self with these swims, they were very understanding. I'd come into work with wet hair, after just getting out of the water. And nobody batted an eye. The people at Adobe rallied behind me and allowed me to change into the roles I was growing into. I ended up in a public-speaking role at Adobe. And they gifted me with incredible opportunities. Between the people at Adobe and my fellow members of the Dolphin Club and South End Rowing Club (open water swim clubs in San Francisco), the secret ingredient of



my journey has been a sense of community. It has been people believing in me.

Sometimes in San Francisco in the winter you stand there on the beach thinking, "Gosh, it's so early in the morning. Everyone else is in bed. And it's cold. It's foggy." Then you see an 80-year-old saunter past you and just get in the water. There are days in the winter when you may be in for only five or 10 minutes. But you get out of that water, and you feel like you've just conquered the world. When you swim in the cold Pacific in the morning

in the winter, you conquer the hardest challenge of the day.

In those swim clubs, there's attitude of "Why would you take a boat across the English Channel, when you can swim it?" But there's also support for swimming five minutes. You never get out of the cold Pacific saying, "That was a bad swim." It is always a mental accomplishment.

### What are you training for now?

I'm learning that there is bravery in choosing not to do something that you probably could do, mentally and physically. I learned what I wanted to learn from those swims, and for a while I switched to mountaineering. The highest mountain I climbed was Aconcagua (highest mountain in the Americas, and highest outside of Asia).

For now, though, I don't have a swim or mountain on the horizon. The aftermath of each of the events I did continues to percolate in my life. I'm happy just where I am right now.

### How did public speaking become your new career?

Adobe put me in front of audiences of about 12,000. I was very nervous. But it was this adrenaline that was just like jumping off a boat in the middle of the ocean, and now I'm keeping busy doing it on my own. Amid COVID-19, I do miss the energy of a room, but I'm keeping busy on Zoom.

I didn't grow up a swimmer and I don't necessarily have the build for it. I have small hands and small feet. But if I as a swimmer can do what I did, then others can accomplish far more than they might imagine. I don't speak in order to stand on any kind of pedestal. I just want to share what I've experienced. We all have a duty to be the best version of ourselves. That doesn't necessarily mean being the skinniest or richest woman in the room, or having started the most companies. What it means is deeply personal for each of us.

I believe that mine is a story worth hearing at a time of such grief, of such collective grieving over what could have been, what should have been. Not that there's always a silver lining, but you have to hope for one, and only in time will it reveal itself. ♦

**CRAIG MULLANEY** is a Brunswick Partner, based in Washington, DC. Mr. Mullaney is an experienced advisor, a New York Times best-selling author and a renowned expert on executive use of digital and social media to communicate and lead organizations.