

**Swell day to learn to surf
Visually impaired students learn confidence, make memories**

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PONCE INLET -- PONCE INLET - She knew it was a sunny day - she could feel **the** sun on her face. And **the** sound of **the** waves told her she was at **the** beach, as planned.

But what 15-year-old Heidi Springstroh really couldn't fathom Saturday was gliding over water on a board.

"I've always been scared to try," she said. "I was scared today."

The Indialantic high-schooler has more than **the** usual reason to shrink from **the** challenge of barreling into **the** waves - she can't tell how far away things are.

She is legally blind, as are **the** 36 other teenagers who joined her at Winterhaven Park. But before Saturday morning was over, she was absolutely amped about what she had done.

"My second try, I was able to stand," she said. "I couldn't believe it."

And, then, came **the** feeling of being pushed along **the** contours of **the** waves.

"It was exhilarating. It was just amazing," Heidi said. "I was amazed that I could actually do it. I never thought I could stand up."

The 14- to 22-year-olds come to **the Center for the Visually Impaired** in Daytona Beach after school and on weekends to learn how to cope with being legally blind.

This time, though, their life coaches asked them to think of something they had never done but wanted to pursue.

And that's how collectively they came up with **the** idea of surfing. About 20 students from a similar agency in Jacksonville were also invited.

"What we're trying to do here is get **the** students to take risks and take on these challenges," explained Dan Pekich, program manager **for the Center for the Visually Impaired**.

"Once you give them a little bit of confidence, it can spread to their future employment goals, their social lives."

Their guides to winging across **the** water came from **the** Surfari Surf School in Ormond Beach. Rick Gehris, owner of **the** shop, said he was pleased with how everyone did. Ten instructors joined him to give **the** aspiring surfers a 30-minute ground lesson. Then, they took to **the** waves, with one instructor leading each surfer.

Gehris paddled behind one girl who can't stand on land without **the** help of a walker as she lay on **the** board and sliced through **the** waves. Cecilia Rodriguez, who is 100 percent blind, came off that board declaring, "This is officially one of my memories."

Chris Patterson, an instructor who works in **the** communications department at Halifax Health when he's not surfing, said he'll never forget **the** smiles he saw.

"It was amazing to see these kids," he said. "No fear."

Dominic Perez, 17, of Deltona ended **the** day content to bodyboard. Being carried by **the** waves and listening to **the** excitement of his fellow students made it more than just a regular day at **the** beach **for the** student at **the** Florida School **for the** Deaf and Blind in St. Augustine.

"It was exciting," said **the** teen, who has been legally blind since an injury when he was 3 years old.

Cutline: Photo 1: Orlando resident Kevin Brathwaite, 17, who is visually impaired, gets into position on his surfboard along with other kids while they listen to surf instructions Saturday.

Photo 2: Dominic Moralez, 17, of DeLand stands briefly while riding a wave on his surfboard as surf coach Jessica Bickmeyer cheers him on.

Photo 3: Surfing coach Chris Patterson, in **the** red shirt, shows Dominic Moralez, 17, of DeLand, who is visually impaired, **the** finer points of body position before heading out into **the** surf to catch waves Saturday.

Photo 4: Surf instructor Ricky Gehris teaches visually impaired kids **the** basics of surfing Saturday morning. After practicing on dry land, **the** surfers, each with a coach in tow, hit **the** water to try their luck.

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