A challenge for people with special needs

By Brian Clark
Special to Venture

Environmental TravelingCompanions director Diane Poslosky and Denny Brizendine check out a sea kayak

Gail Kemper's paddle dipped into San Francisco Bay as her sleek ocean kayak sliced through the water off Belvedere Point. A double-breasted cormorant launched itself from a navigation buoy near her boat, crashed clumsily into the water.

slapped its wings and took off in fright.

The sun glistened on the calm waters of the bay, and a big grin flashed across Kemper's face as she and her partner pointed their double kayak out into Raccoon Strait.

It was a far cry from a wintry day 13 years ago when Kemper's neck was broken in a car accident near Spokane, Wash. The crash left the 50-year-old Santa Rosa computer programmer with paralyzed legs and only partial use of her hands.

In the dreary months that followed, she thought her life was over. She never dreamed she'd one day paddle a sea kayak on San Francisco Bay.

"Disabilities weren't as talked about then as they are now," said Kemper of the San Francisco-based Environmental Traveling Companions, known as ETC.

There weren't as many facilities for us or even blue parking spaces. And I didn't know about wonderful groups like ETC."

ETC is a non-profit group that has taken thousands of handicapped and disadvantaged people on white water river outings, ski trips and sea kayak tours in the 13 years it has been active in Northern California.

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ETC helps to build confidence

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— Diane Posisky

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It took Kemper two years to emerge from the depths of her depression, but when she did, she began to make plans for the future. She entered college and became a computer programmer. During the past decade, she has taken up archery, competed in wheelchair races and now swims at least three miles a week.

Two hours after Kemper and six other enthusiastic wheelchair-bound kayakers, plus an equal number of ETC guides, shoved off from the Sea Trek headquarters in Sausalito, Kemper was at the rustored officer's house at Camp Reynolds on Angel Island where the group spent the night. She was still beaming from the crossing.

“I decided to come because going out on the ocean sounded exciting, and I love water,” she said. “But I never thought it would be so easy and so fun. I've never been out on the ocean and I was afraid I might tip over. And I thought about sharks and other sea creatures. But because I was paddling with a guide, my fears evaporated.”

Denise Breslin, a 39-year-old speech and language teacher from Santa Rosa, avoided other wheelchair people for four years after a fall from a tree in 1969 left her legs paralyzed.

“I didn't want to make the best of being in a wheelchair and I didn't want to know others who were in chairs,” said Breslin, who grew up swimming and surfing in southern California. “They depressed me even more.”

“But overnight my attitude changed, and I met some dynamic people in wheelchairs. Still, it wasn't until about three years ago that I got into sports. And since then, I've played basketball and racquetball, snow-skied, and water-skied.”

Breslin put together a Sonoma County wheelchair group for the ETC trip to Angel Island.

“Kayaking is special,” he said. “I can go into areas you normally can't reach. And for people in wheelchairs, you get a feeling of independence that you normally don't have. It's very near to being just like anyone else. I love it.”

When a bicycle crash above the UC Berkeley campus years ago left Bert Egley paralyzed, from the waist down, the rugged athlete from Sunnyvale didn't let much time pass before he took up wheelchair racing.

“I was hospitalized for four months and as soon as I got out I was right away into sports,” said Egley, 27. “I got Phil Wood racing hubs for my chair, did some 10k races and played basketball.”

Egley also has snow skied in a sled, and it wasn't long before he was rafting with ETC all over California and the West. He went on his first sea kayak trip several years ago and bought a white-water kayak this year. He's working hard on his Eskimo roll and has even taken his boat down the South Fork of the American River. But the thing he's most proud of is becoming an ETC guide himself and helping with outings.

“I've been on about a dozen ocean kayak trips and I've been an assistant on ones we've run for blind folks,” he said. “It was great. And I don't know of anyone — chair people or blind — who hasn't had a good time.”

And I sure appreciate ETC. It's helped me and others to get out and do things we couldn't do on my own. It's really broadened a lot of people's horizons. And besides that, it's a neat group. It's sort of one big family.”

Denise Breslin, who directs ETC and its 140 volunteers, couldn't agree more.

“What we're trying to do is provide fun and challenging outdoor adventures and wilderness experiences for people with special needs, as well as do environmental education,” said 32-year-old Posisky, who is a veteran outdoor education specialist.

“It's our belief that in addition to being enjoyable, things like this build confidence and help people overcome stereotypes or self-imposed limitations. In a supportive environment, people focus on their abilities, not disabilities.”

ETC also has worked with inner-city and immigrant groups, taking them on river and sea kayaking trips.

“People get a great deal out of these adventures and it exposes them to a different world,” said Posisky. “And what's really been neat is that some of these kids have gone on to become ETC volunteers and assistant guides.”

“Of course, we recognize that this isn't a panacea and isn't going to cure everyone's problems or neuroses. But getting people out on the water and into the mountains is good medicine for the soul. And not just for people who are blind or have other disabilities. The guides get a lot of joy out of this too. I know I sure do.”

If you go: For more information on ETC, write Diane Posisky or Patty McCleary at ETC, 3520 Folsom Blvd., San Francisco, 94118, or call (415) 474-7652. Groups are encouraged to contact ETC and rates are based on a sliding scale, depending on the ability to pay.