



TWO

OF US

STORY BY Rosamund Burton | PHOTOGRAPH BY Louise Kennerley

In 2013, NSW Department of Industry executive director and paraplegic Jane Spring, 54, asked her friend, Green Building Council CEO Romilly Madew, 51, if she'd join her in a 1km ocean swim. Five years later, they are still competing.

ROMILLY: Jane and I became friends at the 1986 Interschool rowing event in Adelaide. We were both at Sydney Uni; she was doing law and I was studying agriculture economics. Initially, I thought she was serious and intense. I was competitive, but wanted to talk to everyone and have fun. In 1987, we rowed together in a lightweight four, and her now husband, Murray Clarke, coached us. I was in awe of Jane: her focus as a sculler was incredible. She went on to win NSW state titles. Then in 1990 she was in a car accident, which left her a paraplegic.

We'd lost touch with one another then, because I'd left uni and was doing triathlons and surf lifesaving. Then I met my husband, David, and moved to Lake George, near Canberra, where we had a winery.

In 2006, when I became Green Building Council of Australia CEO and started commuting to Sydney, I reconnected with Jane. She rolled into my 40th birthday party and regaled everyone with hysterical stories of what our mutual friend, Adrienne Cahalan, a well-known sailor, and I got up to in our rowing days. Since then we've been as tight as.

In 2013, several weeks before her 50th, Jane said she wanted to do the Toowoong Bay 1km ocean swim on the NSW Central Coast. We're now in our fifth season, and do two or three races a summer. We have raced in some shockers with rips, tides and wind. I've wanted to pull out, and Jane will say, "I'm fine, keep going." She needs to be carried into the water, then starts swimming straight away with a snorkel, because she can't float for long. She follows my feet. My three kids are lifesavers like me and act as water safety, shadowing her on rescue boards.

We were doing the Malabar Magic Ocean Swim, of which Paralympian Louise Sauvage is patron. Jane kept flicking my feet, so I kept swimming faster. It was Jane's fastest swim, and she beat the legendary Louise. Afterwards she was exhausted. I said, "Well, you were flicking my feet." She replied, "Only to tell you I was there!" We learnt after that.

In the 2016 Toowoong Bay swim, we rounded a mark and my daughter yelled, "Mum! wave!" I lifted Jane up and together we sank into this massive wave, then a second one. We pulled Jane across a board, and I paddled it frantically

over the third wave, before it broke. When we eventually got her into the rescue boat, she said, "I'm happy to finish the race." "Jane," I replied, "we're going in." I was completely buggered.

In the past three years, she and Murray have been to Gallipoli and Greece, and on a camping safari in Africa. Jane copes with being paralysed from the waist down, the risk of injury due to lack of feeling, and the constant nerve pain. Nothing stops her. She has this quiet strength, and does everything an able-bodied person does. She's got a great job, she's ocean swimming in her 50s and she's travelled the world.

JANE: My recollection of Romilly at Interschool is Adrienne and her stealing all the Melbourne University men's eight jerseys. They caused complete mayhem. I was in a single scull and my coach expected 100 per cent focus, so I was on my best behaviour.

In 1990 I won the NSW lightweight single scull and Australian double scull races, and was working towards the world championships when I had the accident. The driver of the car in which I was travelling fell asleep and we hit a tree. I spent five months in hospital and during that time Murray – who had been my coach – and I started going out.

I was a very athletic person, and ocean swimming is my opportunity to do sport with other people again. I'm competitive and like to be less than double the fastest time, that's my benchmark of success, in my private category as paraplegic person with snorkel. It's also my chance to experience danger, which in a wheelchair is pretty hard, so I love it.

Romilly is overwhelmingly positive and pulsates with energy. If she's in, she's 150 per cent in. Her support for my ocean swimming is a huge commitment, but that's Romilly, and I love that in her. The Toowoong Bay ocean swim in 2013 was on the day of my actual 50th. To be in a wheelchair and doing that was so exciting. The conditions in 2016 at Toowoong Bay were pretty bad, but I didn't panic, because Romilly is so experienced.

At the Malabar Magic Ocean Swim, I beat Louise Sauvage by one minute. She's 10 years younger than me, so I was proud of myself.

Romilly and I both work full-time, so our sport is extra. Romilly is president of her local surf lifesaving club on top of her demanding work role. I swim three mornings a week at Leichhardt pool in Sydney and ocean swim in addition to what can be an exhausting job in the NSW public service.

We're both fortunate that we have incredibly supportive husbands who do not have a gender view. They are happy to do the more house-orientated tasks, like maintaining the contents of the fridge. Rom's lost her mum now, but we've both had mothers who really supported us and had 100 per cent confidence in us as people. My mum thinks I'm wonderful and can do anything. She expects me to be the best. I feel very fortunate that I've got that really strong character behind me.

Rom and I often catch up for lunch in the city. She's a huge supporter of my career. If I say, "I might do this," she's like, "Talk to this person and I'll talk to that person." She's so affirming, so on-board. She's there to help. ■

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