

Pure Light Racing Big Isle residents race on adaptive paddling team

by Kim Eaton
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It was never a question of if. Darralyn Clarke knew she could paddle, even though she only had one arm.

"I don't consider myself handicap in any way," said the 50-year-old South Kona resident. "I knew in my heart I could do it. I just had to figure out how."

Using a paddle that had been adapted for her prosthesis with a hook, Clarke got down to business. She wanted to be a steersman, so she practiced during the winter months, with the help of her family and friends. It was an emotional, and physical, roller coaster, but her dedication and hard work paid off.

For the past three years Clarke has paddled with Keoua Canoe Club in Honaunau. More recently, she joined the Pure Light Racing Team, a 12-member adaptive paddling team representing Hawaii at the IVF World Sprints this year. Clarke and Holualoa resident Mark Wormley, a 60-year-old left leg amputee, are the only two Big Island representatives on the team.

A nonprofit organization created in 2002, Project Pure Light primarily uses Hawaiian outrigger canoes as a means to allow physically, mentally and emotionally challenged individuals to participate in ocean recreation and water sports. Through this program, the competitive adaptive paddling crew Pure Light Racing was formed in 2004.

In addition to Clarke and Wormley, the team consists of men and women of varied ages and backgrounds; eight of them are in wheelchairs and one is blind. The team currently only has 11 paddlers and still needs two female paddlers, preferably young and athletic, and their disability has to be one that fits the paralympic criteria, said coach Aka Hemmings.



"These guys are so overqualified. Each has a different story, and they're incredible people," Clarke said. "We really are a team. Everyone has to mimic each other. We all breathe together, we enter the water together and we exit the water together."

While the World Sprints has had adaptive paddling as an exhibition event, this is the first year it is being recognized as its own class with all 12 paddlers having to be adaptive.



Members of Pure Light Racing paddle in an outrigger canoe – Photo Special to West Hawaii Today

"It's a chance to set the field, to set it up for other teams to come after us," Wormley said.

Wormley's left leg was amputated in 1968 when he was injured during the Vietnam War. He walked on crutches for about 12 or 13 years before being fitted for a prosthesis in 1981. He was 19 years old when he lost his leg, but he said he was lucky in a lot of ways.

"There were 50 other amputees at a time (at the hospital). Everyone has an opportunity to feel down at some point, but you don't feel down for long because everyone in there was going through the same thing or worse," he said. "It was a great environment for recovery."

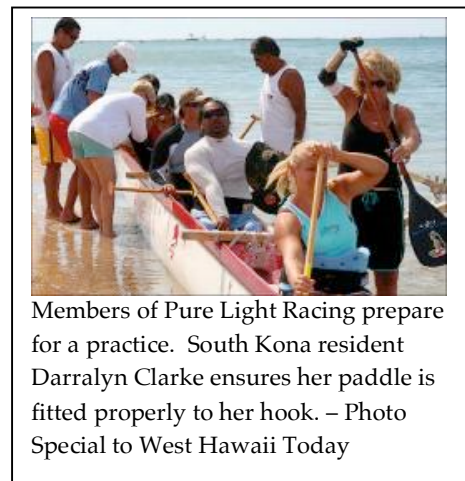
Since then, he has done some cycling and even a season of wheelchair basketball, but not many other adaptive sports. He began paddling with Keauhou Canoe Club about four years ago, when he and his wife moved to the Big Island.

"Until we got here, I'd never been in an outrigger canoe and didn't know much about them," Wormley said.

Members of Pure Light Racing prepare for a practice. South Kona resident Darralyn Clarke ensures her paddle is fitted properly to her hook. - Photo Special To West Hawaii Today

The challenge has been ensuring his artificial leg stays in working condition as it is in salt water often. He has to have a leg that will not rust, and he monitors it closely.

"Paddling with the other men and women in Pure Light is exciting," he said. "It's great to be out on the water with a lot of people of like-mind and like-spirit. A lot of them have it much tougher than me."



Members of Pure Light Racing prepare for a practice. South Kona resident Darralyn Clarke ensures her paddle is fitted properly to her hook. – Photo Special to West Hawaii Today

Since the adaptive paddling team primarily resides on Oahu, practices are there and Wormley flies over about two weekends a month. As a steersman, Clarke flies over every weekend, despite the \$400 to \$600 monthly bill.

Born with one arm, Clarke has known no other life. The umbilical cord wrapped around her arm and kept it from growing. She was fitted with a prosthesis at six months and got her hook - which allows her to open, close and grab things -- at nine months.

"My arm has enabled me in so much; it hasn't stopped me from doing anything," Clarke said. "I use the hook for everything -- a hammer, an ice pick, I write notes on it. When cooking I often forget that my left hand can burn. I'll pull out the cookie sheet with my hook and grab the other side with my left hand. I've gotten burnt so many times."

Despite her many adventures over the years, joining the adaptive paddling team is the "most incredible thing" that has happened to her, aside from her husband and children, Clarke said.

"The team itself is the most inspirational, dedicated group of paddlers I have ever had the joy of hanging out with," she said. "I'm part of a team. I feel equal as part of a team -- I don't feel less than. It's probably the first time I've really felt like I fit in, like I belong."

More info:

If you are interested in joining the team or donating to Project Pure Light, contact coach Aka Hemmings at 206-8785 or email info@projectpurelight.com.



Wheelchairs line the beach after the occupants of each one climbed into the outrigger canoe. – Photo Special to West Hawaii Today.