

WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA'S SMARTEST MAGAZINE FOR WOMEN

VERVE

MAY/JUNE 2009

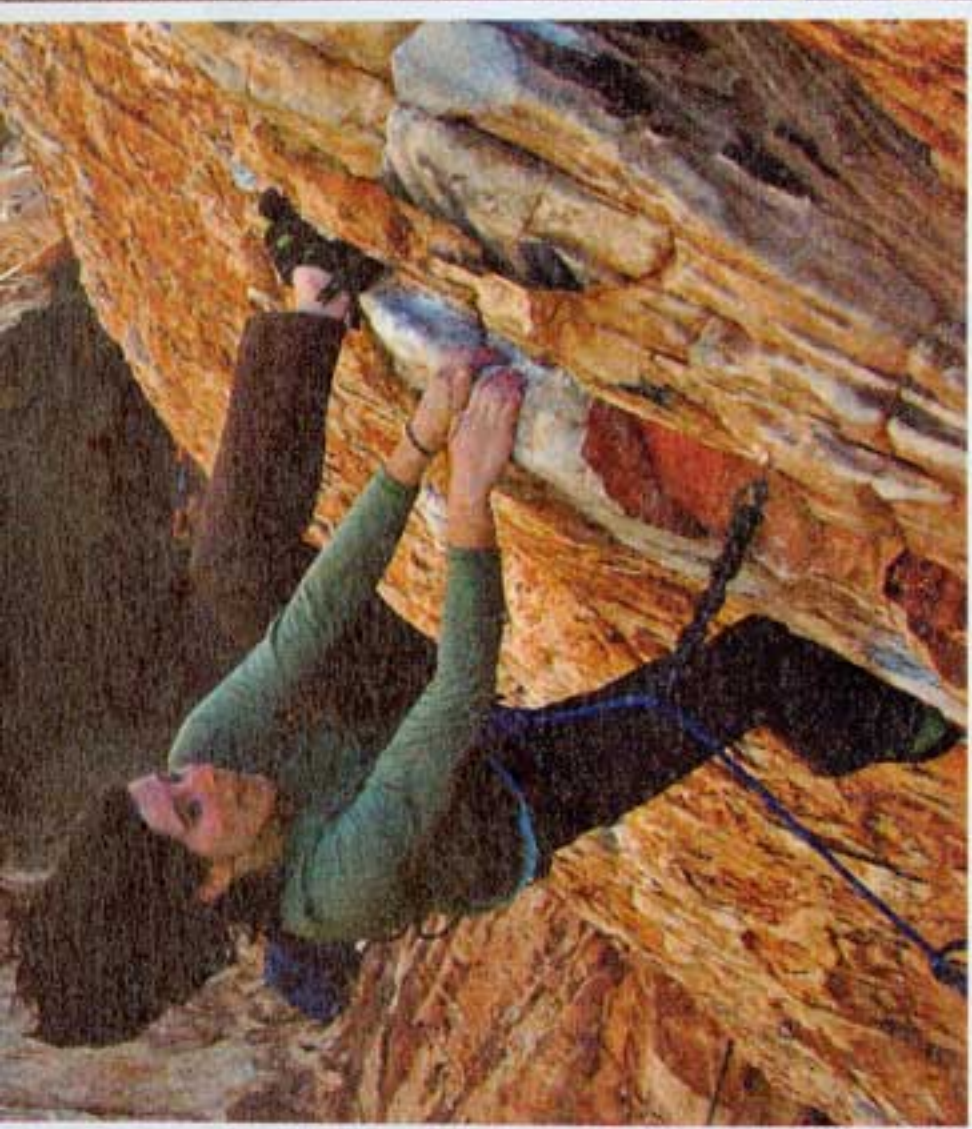
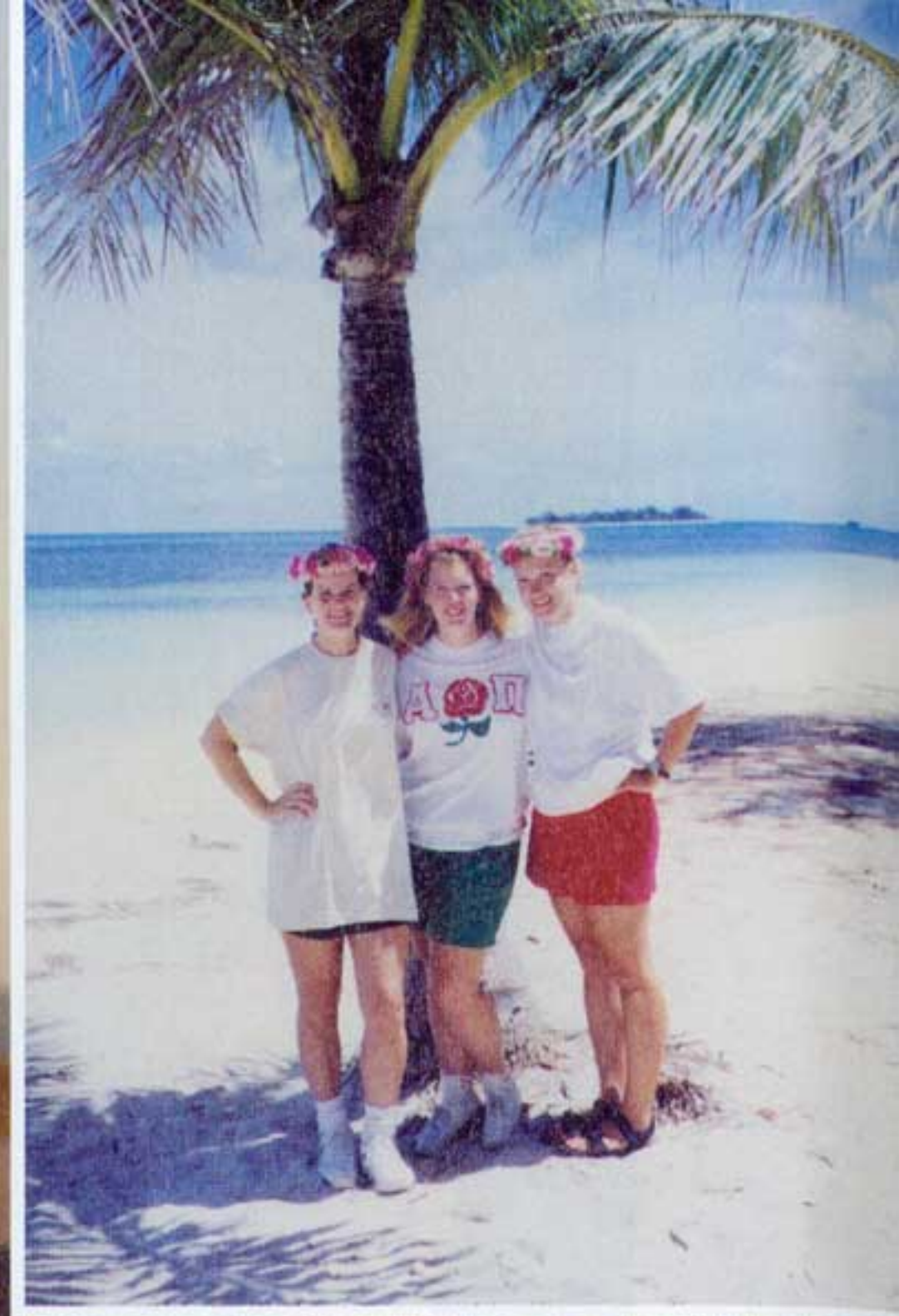
20 WNC WOMEN
ON WHAT IT TAKES TO...

SWIM WITH SHARKS

JOIN THE CIRCUS
LIVE ON AN ISLAND
FLY A PLANE
CLIMB ROCKS
RACE A DIRT BIKE
EXPLORE CAVES
TRAVEL SOLO
CATCH A BIG FISH



Brenda Ramer,
founder + director
of Team ECCO
in Hendersonville



TYPE "A"
FOR
ADVENTURE

by Janet Hurley

Perhaps the universe figured I needed a kick in the pants. Right after I started dating my now-husband David in 1991, I met someone who'd gone to college with him and knew his ex-girlfriend. "Last I heard she was leading a canoe expedition through the Northwest Territories," the guy reported.

Expedition? That word had never described anything in my life—unless you count crossing the Mason-Dixon Line to attend college or going for an extra long walk on the Jersey shore.



ROCKING THE BOAT At 30, world champion kayaker Anna Levesque founded Girls At Play, a business that caters specifically to women kayakers. She realized in 2002 that there were very few businesses that did so. Levesque was named one of the most inspirational kayakers alive in the March issue of *Canoe & Kayak* magazine.

Up a Creek

But with plenty of paddles. Anna Levesque's business encourages women to play in the water.

by Liisa Sullivan . photo by Scott Lessing

*“There were no real resources for women—**nothing in paddling was geared toward women.** When I would train with my friends, I realized we were all making the same mistakes.”*

ALL IT TOOK was a few minutes of thumbing through the pages of an instructional kayak book in 2002. Canadian Anna Levesque had by then won a bronze medal at the freestyle kayaking world championships and had sponsorship deals lined up with Dagger Kayaks and Nike ACG. She had just finished a paddling competition in Ontario when she picked up the book, written by a friend, and thought: *the instructions are great, but where are all the pictures of women?* “There were no real resources for women—nothing in paddling was geared toward women,” she says. “When I would train with my friends, I realized we were all making the same mistakes.”

That was all it took for Levesque to realize there was room in the kayak industry for a business geared exclusively toward women. In 2003, with \$5,000 and a great deal of marketing help from Nike, Levesque made her first instructional DVD, *Girls at Play*. In 2004, at the ripe old age of 30, Levesque launched Girls at Play as a company that sells DVDs and other products, teaches women to kayak and offers deluxe women’s kayaking retreats to Mexico. On trips and in talks or classes, Levesque preaches a mantra of empowerment through paddling, and it’s worked. The business started as something of a supplement to Levesque’s paddling career, and now it’s grown into a full-time pursuit and a profitable business. “I’m very fortunate,” Levesque says, referring to the sponsorship relationships left from her days as a pro paddler. “Sponsors still see me as a really good ambassador.”

After college at UNC-Chapel Hill, Levesque lived the life of a kayak bum. Originally from Ontario, she had taken

up paddling at 20. Various paddling gigs between 1996 and 2004 took her to Costa Rica, Chile, Ecuador, Mexico, New Zealand, Spain, France, Australia, Austria and Africa. But Asheville was the first place she’d ever felt like signing a lease. She loved the paddling culture, and the culture in general. She had also, by around 2004, met her husband Andrew Holcombe, a professional kayaker whose family helped found the Nantahala Outdoor Center, a Bryson City-based operation that started on the Nantahala River in 1972 and now offers raft and kayak trips and instruction on nine area rivers.

Levesque is the driving force behind Girls at Play, which she operates mainly out of the Nantahala Outdoor Center, but Holcombe does help. He tags along on the eight-day trips to Mexico, which run \$1,550 per person (not including airfare). “He’s great at staying in the background,” Levesque says. “He’s on the river for added safety. He doesn’t try to teach or step in.” Nor does he come along on the popular week-long Outdoor Goddess trip, which costs \$1,150 and includes kayaking instruction, room and board, massage, yoga classes and meditation guidance.

Kayaking has long been a male-dominated sport, especially whitewater kayaking. Levesque attributes this to its extreme image, with most people picturing themselves boating over 40-foot waterfalls. But she’s beginning to see an increase in the number of women paddlers taking on more aggressive waters. Her women-centered approach to kayaking, which started as a good cause and something of an educational effort, has proved a shrewd business move. To date, the company has sold more than

5,000 DVDs and taken hundreds of women on trips and retreats.

In her classes, Levesque combines confidence-building techniques with technical drills tailor-made for women. For example, men and women have different centers of gravity. A woman’s is in her lower middle of the abdomen, while for men, it’s the upper middle. “I teach women how to paddle based on their bodies,” Levesque says. “And, when the time comes for me to deliver some tough love on the water, I hope that our trust has built to a level where they are more receptive to my instruction.”

Levesque attributes her business success to her personal touch in her one-on-one classes, which account for about half her company’s revenues. For example, she’ll spend an hour working with a client on overcoming a fear of flipping over. But it also helps that Levesque is an excellent grassroots marketer, generating interest in kayaking and women’s sports in general through regular blogs, newsletters and speaking engagements. She was quoted in a 2007 *TIME* magazine story, “Floating Your Own Boat,” about renewed interest in kayaking and an uptick in women kayakers particularly. A 2006 *Shape* story featuring Levesque pitched kayaking as good for calorie burning and core strength. For her part, Levesque believes there are few problems that a trip or two down the river can’t solve. “I started Girls at Play to be of service to women in kayaking. In the beginning, it was to help women learn how to kayak better,” she says. “Now, I essentially help them live the life they want to live.”

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For more information about Girls at Play, visit www.watergirlsatplay.com.