



Kerri Vanderbom

By Jake Stein

Kerri Vanderbom is a Post-Doctoral Fellow at University of Alabama at Birmingham, where she works at Lakeshore Foundation. She gets to watch Paralympic national and international sports teams practice in her spare time, and she stays active by

playing on the Lakeshore basketball team with her husband, Derek. But before life in academia, Kerri was a world champion adapted water-skier.

And Kerri was born with spina bifida.

She was always active as a kid. Whether it was climbing trees or pushing around on a skateboard (always faster than her wheelchair), physical activity and sports were very important to her. When she graduated high school and started competing in water-skiing, it not only bolstered her confidence and independence, but shaped her career path. Competitive water-skiing opened up a new lifestyle of activity and world travel, where Kerri met lifelong friends, and eventually her husband — also a water-skier. It's no wonder Kerri earned her PhD in Exercise Sports Science -Movement Studies in Disability from Oregon State University.

Kerri believes she owes much of her physical determination to her upbringing; her family was never overprotective, never treating her as “special.” She had the same support, and same expectations put upon her, as her able-bodied peers. “I think that’s really important for any kid with a disability,” Kerri says. “They should be pushed to be as independent as possible, and [to] set goals for their future.”

“Part of my way of dealing with it is allowing myself to feel the frustration and be upset, but not for too long,” Kerri explains. When a problem comes up related to her spina bifida, Kerri goes to the doctor, she takes care of it, and she moves on. Buildings and parking lots being inaccessible and out of compliance with the ADA are a daily frustration, but Kerri points out: “I can’t be too upset that I have trouble getting my chair out of my car on a hill, because I’m lucky I can afford to have a car.”

In her own words, “Having a disability is just one of the human experiences.” There are refugees of war, or those living in poverty. “We all have our thing.”

For Kerri, as for the rest of us, perhaps, it's all about positive attitude, a sense of humor, and staying active. Kerri realized the benefits of an active lifestyle — social and physical — from her experience as an active child and a competitive water-skier, and knew she wanted to study it. And if Kerri had never started on her path of exercise — both studying and participating in sports — she may never have met her husband while competing in water-skiing tournaments in Australia, where she happened to be studying one fateful year.

Now she remains active with her husband on the Lakeshore basketball team. “Other than that,” Kerri says, “it’s just the usual. Work, Netflix, etc.” She retains her sense of humor, her down-to-earth perspective. Her go-getter attitude is clear in her pursuit of what she loves — be it wheelchair basketball, sports science research, or her days as an adapted water-skier.

Sure, “we all have our thing,” but not all of us can say we are world champion PhD’s in Baddassery (ok, sports science)!

