words by richard read

surfing life's waves

We made an odd pair, the Iron Man triathlete and I, walking toward crashing surf south of Daytona Beach.

Michael O'Shaughnessy, biceps bulging, back tanned, eyes firmly on the waves, strode toward the sea bracing a surfboard squarely above his head. I scrambled behind, my keyboard-weary fingers grasping a second surfboard.

O'Shaughnessy, 47, has twice paddled a board 105 miles from Cuba to Key West, Florida, setting a Guinness world record. He's at a stage where he wants to pass along the fruits of his good fortune, whether to sluggish journalists or struggling single mothers. For some reason, he thought he could teach a landlubber to surf.

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O'Shaughnessy launched into the breakers, swiftly paddling out to sea. "Don't let the board get between you and a wave," he warned.

I lined up my long, ungainly board. I pointed it into the surf. I paddled like mad. Wave after wave shot across the fiberglass, pounding me in the chest, sucking me backward. Finally I arrived beyond the breakers.

O'Shaughnessy craned his neck, surveying the incoming waves. He's a classic self-made man, a severe childhood stutterer who dropped out of ninth grade only to return to school, complete college and become an acclaimed public speaker. Selling real estate, he became a millionaire at 31.

In 2000, O'Shaughnessy—inspired by his mother, who raised six children as a single parent—founded The Millennium Woman Foundation with his wife, actress Leslie Windram. The nonprofit organization helps women break free of debt, discover their own power, advance in careers and secure their financial futures.

"OK, here it comes!" O'Shaughnessy yelled.

I paddled furiously toward shore. I felt the wave surge behind me. The board's nose dipped. Incredibly, I felt the board begin to glide down the wave.

I picked up speed. It dawned on me that if this was a surfing movie, I would be standing up by now. So I clambered to my knees.

Astonished, I found the board was still moving forward. Awkwardly, I managed to stand up. I flailed my arms.

And there I was, riding the board, the big blue wave arcing, the wind in my hair, the broad white beach spread out before me—for at least a whole second-and-a-half.

Then the board shot forward. I shot backward. With an ungainly splash, the ride was over.

I staggered back to the beach house and guzzled a bottle of water, slowly returning to life. Closing my eyes, I thought of O'Shaughnessy's and Windram's millennium women.

The Millennium Woman Foundation scholarship recipients strive to become lawyers, airplane pilots, beauticians, mechanics and more—who knows, even journalists who aspire to surf. If they can just get past the waves that life sends crashing down on them, they will be able to ride for a lifetime. ▼

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