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Chasing Swells: Heavy Barrels and Fearless Hearts
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the photographer & birth doula

Photographer, birth doula, surf mama and ocean advocate Kaili Reynolds
protects — and captures — our play.

WORDS LIZA MONROY



CLARA MONROY

Although she's been surfing since she was 18 years-old, Santa Cruz birth doula, childbirth educator and surf-photographer, Kaili Reynolds, didn't get obsessed with surfing until she had her third child. In the childbirth classes she taught, she frequently spoke about the necessity of having a 'happiness protection clause' for expectant mothers.

Pro-surfer, longboarding icon, and shaper Ashley Lloyd, pregnant with her son, was shooting the film *Super-Stoked Surf Mamas of Pleasure Point* when she was a student on one of Kaili's courses. Constantly on call for births as a doula, being unable to be away from her phone kept Kaili out of the water. Her own surfing had fallen by the wayside. "I'd go around saying, 'you have to protect your fun,'" she says, "and I wasn't really doing that for myself. I needed to protect my play, too."

After she started carving out more time to get into the ocean, she found her surf and birth communities overlapped. One day, Kaili spotted Lloyd out giving a surf lesson. "She stayed after to help me," Kaili says. "She helped unlock surfing for me that morning." And on a subsequent 'intentional' coaching session for Kaili, the two went out on a big day. "I was scared, and she was this joyful glee-head," Kaili says. "I was like, how can I be scared if she's so stoked?" Lloyd's stoke was contagious.

Nowadays, says Kaili, "surfing is not a sport for me. Surfing is an exit - departing from this world and being unreachable in a very happy way." A longtime photographer, Kaili realised that as she was getting back to her ocean-self, on days when it really was too big for her to go out, water photography could be a way to stay connected to surfing and the ocean. "If it was super-low tide, I'd walk as far as I could in rain boots," she says. "It was never close enough because I love being in the ocean. I finally got water housing. I didn't know what I was doing, but I knew I wanted to be a part of it."

Surf photography overlapped with a running theme in her land-life: a focus on representation. Seeing, "disparities and inequities in how people were treated," - in both birthing rooms and the line-ups - Kaili wanted to do something about it. Whether that meant helping to make policy change in labour and delivery, or ensuring historically excluded surfers are featured in surf photography.

"I take the time to think about who I'm really highlighting when I share something," she says. "I want it to feel memorable that literally every kind of human surfs, too. Keep them in your mind when you're out in the world and creating things for others

to see, because what if no-one kept you in mind? That's always in my mind. When I shoot for a brand or campaign I want to know, 'who are we shooting?' I don't want to keep photographing what we've already seen."

What is definitely not often seen is pregnant women surfing in mainstream surf imagery. Kaili was especially proud to help change this via her work on a campaign for Chelsea Woody, who was pregnant at the time, for Vans. "It was super-exciting as a birth worker to see a pregnant woman in a surf campaign actually surfing," Kaili says, "not just holding a board, staring at the sea." The campaign airing in Vans stores on repeat, "felt full-circle," she says. "I'm stoked to live in a time where pregnant women are celebrated and highlighted in surf media that isn't a women-specific brand. Times are changing for the better."

Looking to this brighter future for women's representation in surf media, Kaili's many projects in the works include an illustrated photography book project in its own nascent stages entitled *Surf & Birth*, and a film, *Walk*, on which she's collaborating with like-minded water women Dina El Dessouky and Banna Bazzarie.

Kaili credits her early challenges for paving the way to more time in her wetsuit and fins, shooting events and contests such as California's Queen of the Point, *Women on Waves*, *Black Surf Santa Cruz*, and for various brands, collaborators, and passion projects. "Having suffered through hard stuff gives you gratitude," she says. "Successes feel better if you've also had to struggle. You gotta appreciate the struggle."

Despite keeping so busy, Kaili credits a gentler pace for her greater sense of peace, "a happy slowing down, listening to what feels right." Among the deepest connections between, surfing, creativity, and birth, she's discovered, is that while we can have hope and make plans, in the end there's only so much that's actually under our control. As a midwife-mentor told her: "You have to hold your plan with an open hand."

"I hate the toxic positivity of 'getting in the ocean always makes everything better!'" She says with a smile. "I used to think, 'today I'm gonna work on drop-knee turns,' or 'get toes over the nose', but maybe that's not what the ocean gave you today. Maybe the ocean said, mid-length, or maybe it doesn't work at all - are you gonna be grumpy about it? I love that the ocean brought that into my life; being open to whatever it gives me. It's all about attitude."

Ashley Lloyd hel

Chelsea Woody, 22 weeks pregnant, shot by Kaili for Vans.



KAILI REYNOLDS

Ashley Lloyd helped Kaili to get back to her ocean-self.



KAILI REYNOLDS