

# SANTA CRUZ WAVES

LIVE THE LIFESTYLE

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# Reel-Life Surf for Healing

Virtual reality brings an immersive surfing experience to indoor-bound seniors

By LIZA MONROY

I constantly complain (sorry, surf buddies) that I didn't find surfing – or surfing didn't find me – until I was almost 34. If only I could surf until I'm 100, I'd say, to make up for lost time.

But it turns out I will be able to ... in a way.

Continuum Hospice & Palliative Care in Capitola is using virtual reality made by Rendever, and it is designed to be used specifically in senior communities and health care organizations. The user-friendly tech provides experiences to indoor-bound seniors and the terminally ill that anyone walking the earth would long for: going on African safaris, frolicking in a room full of puppies, touring the Louvre Museum, skydiving – and yes, surfing.

When Rendever and Continuum approached *Santa Cruz Waves'* publisher Tyler Fox to spearhead the virtual reality surf project, he was faced with the challenge of “trying to go out there and paddle as steady as possible,” with a mini tripod duct-taped to the front of his board. The cameras have wide-angle lenses on either side, to capture 180 degrees on both sides. If the sensitive camera setup were

in the least bit unsteady, the viewer might experience seasickness.

After some trial-and-error, Fox came away with beautiful footage on a sunny day on the Eastside.

“That session turned out awesome,” he says. “It was a summer day, with people out in the water and a few party waves. It feels like you're surfing next to somebody.”

That social element extends past the VR experience itself into Rendever's vision of ending isolation. Rendever's Director of Marketing and Partnerships Grace Andruszkiewicz describes the mission as “centered around reducing social isolation and loneliness, which we have known in the aging industry as an epidemic.”

Since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, the conversation “has become much more mainstream around loneliness and isolation, bringing more attention to what we address,” Andruszkiewicz says. Seniors in assisted living especially had been quarantined in their rooms.

The social experiences the virtual reality allows are able to transcend the digital. Multiple

people at a time can engage for “shared experiences in virtual reality,” Andruszkiewicz explains. “It creates a social experience out of it. People organically open up and talk about what they're seeing, what it reminds them of. That's how we reduce social isolation and anxiety.”

Andruszkiewicz has seen memory care patients who have agitations calm down when experiencing VR. Some instances have been transcendent: One woman with expressive aphasia – the loss of ability to produce language – had a “light switch” moment during a VR experience in which she was put in a room full of golden retriever puppies. She was suddenly “able to put phrases together,” Andruszkiewicz says, “reaching out to the puppies, trying to call them over. That, to me, is one of the most powerful cases.”

Andruszkiewicz has used the technology with her grandmother. “We went back to her childhood home. We have a feature where we can tap into Google Street View ... anywhere in the world that's mapped, we can take and show people really specific places. I took





Tyler Fox carves it up using the GoPro Max, which is capable of simultaneously filming 180 degrees both forward and backward. Photo: Bryan Garrison



Virtually swimming with sharks is always an exciting one. Photo: Courtesy of Rendever





Photograph courtesy of Rendever

her to the front yard of the house she grew up in, and she started telling me stories I'd never heard before. It was fascinating to see the connection to long-term memories that, without the visual stimulation, wouldn't have been made." In this sense, VR plays a key role in the future of reminiscence therapy, a central form of support for Alzheimer's, dementia, and brain injury.

With each experience, there's an emphasis on storytelling, and the VR surf perfectly captures that. While catching and riding waves is a big part of it, just like the art of surfing itself there is much more to it than that. The footage tells a fuller story: the trip to the beach, waxing the boards and carrying them, paddling out and taking in the lineup, and all the sights and sounds along the way.

"I was able to put on a VR headset and relive the session," Fox says. "It was funny, because you can critique how my fiancée was popping up on her board, how you're paddling, and what it looks like from a different angle. It's a trippy feeling being able to turn your head 360 degrees and see all that." Perhaps the VR provides a

view even reality itself cannot.

While VR is an incredible tool for therapy, education, and training, Fox emphasizes that "there's no substitute for the outdoors. It should be used for people who have no other option."

One such person, a Continuum resident named Karla Bunger, went on a virtual safari and saw leopards, tried skydiving, and caught a wave with Fox's surf session, all without leaving her room. She says of the surfing experience, "You get the same sensation as if you were doing it. Amazing."

Originally from the Midwest, she was a world traveler prior to a cancer diagnosis. With VR surfing, she found she could reap the benefits without any of the risk.

"I love the sound of it, the beauty of it. It takes you out of your head and puts you in a good place," Bunger says. "When you're dealing with what I'm going through, you can get in your head, and with virtual reality, it feeds your soul. For people in circumstances where they can't get out, especially someone like me who traveled the world for 20 years, I can't

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do what I used to do. But the virtual reality takes you back to the days of really doing it."

Rendever produces new content every week, and Andruszkiewicz is always on the lookout for new experiences: "Being able to partner with individuals and organizations like we did with Tyler [Fox] offers an opportunity for thousands of seniors around the world to have experiences that would not be accessible otherwise."

The Rendever team also thinks about how to give someone an experience that will change their perspective.

"We're open to having conversations about potential partnerships," Andruszkiewicz says. "If this partnership in particular struck an idea, reach out and let us know."

It looks like I'll be able to surf — along with travel, skydive, mountain climb, roll around in a pile of kittens, and perhaps fly to space — well into my golden years, after all. The virtual possibilities are endless. 🌀