



Black Surf Santa Cruz proudly hosted our 4th annual Liberation Paddle Out (LPO) on June 22, 2024, at Cowell Beach. It was a paddle out for George Floyd in June 2020 called to action by Black Girls Surf that birthed the vision and idea for Black Surf Santa Cruz's origination. Our annual Liberation Paddle Out serves as a commemoration of our roots, an honoring of George Floyd and our ancestors that were rarely granted opportunities and access for recreation, ease and play, and an opportunity to honor Juneteenth and what Liberation means to Black people presently.

Kelvin Nivens, a long-time Santa Cruz County resident, former personal trainer, gym owner and currently the Founder and Executive Director of Project Daraja is one of those people and he recently shared that it was while he was listening to me talk

about my late-father during my TEDx Talk that he decided this year was this year he was going to face his fears and brave the ocean on a surfboard for the first time. He earnestly shared how he didn't want to be another Black male who didn't know how to swim, wanting instead to find his own relationship with the water.

One of my favorite aspects of being a few years into hosting the annual Liberation Paddle Out is getting to witness people that told me they would never participate, begin to show interest and then eventually find themselves in the water beaming with a smile.

Nivens was one of those people. This experience was extra special to me because Nivens is one of the first faces I remember meeting when I first moved to Santa Cruz back in 2005. Watching him beam in pride, excite-

ment and awe at his accomplishment brought an immense amount of joy to me, as does the entire event. I had the pleasure of sitting down with Nivens post-LPO to talk more about his experience.

The following are excerpts from my full interview with Nivens, the full interview will be posted online on the Santa Cruz Vibes website.

BB: How long have you lived in Santa Cruz?

NIVENS: I've lived in Santa Cruz since 1992. I've never been out in the water any farther than the shore break.

BB: How was your experience at the Liberation Paddle Out and what led you to decide to come this year?

NIVENS: There are so many different feelings and emotions that I went through before the day that led up to it and on that day. It was something that



Photo by Sue Jean

I've been wanting to do for a long time with the perfect opportunity to do it. There was a connection that drew me to the water, despite all my fears and reservations. The day was a culmination of joy, relief and pure exhilaration at doing something that I've been wanting to do for such a long time, but had never done before.

BB: What did being in the water past the shoreline feel like for you?

NIVENS: It's a place that I've driven and walked by hundreds of times and seen from that perspective, but to be in the water and to have the perspective to look up and out where I've seen, but to actually be in the water and see that perspective was mind blowing. It gave me chills because I didn't think that this would ever be something that would happen in my life.

BB: Why do you think you had written yourself out of that narrative or that experience?

NIVENS: I'm drawn to things that I'm good at doing; if I feel that I'm adept, there's this confidence that allows me to pursue whatever that is, regardless of circumstances. For instance, you know, I like to play pickup basketball,

although I don't do it very often. I could do that anywhere I went and even though I don't know people there and I've never played at this park before, I have a set of skills and I know how to speak the common language. So, I feel comfortable doing that.

Having never grown up in water culture and never grown up learning how to proficiently swim, there's a hesitation to try and get better when I don't feel that my skills are quite there. And then there's so many stories and narratives around Black bodies and swimming and Black males not being able to swim. I didn't grow up around beach culture so I just kind of wrote it off because there was no welcoming orientation for me.

I have white friends that surf and swim that have offered to take me out or give me lessons, but when it's something that you're so unfamiliar with it's not just like tagging along, you know, like, there's a lot, a lot more that goes into it. There's a lack of confidence and a lot of fear in showing how much fear there is around water and being in water ... and that's not something that you can just share or expose to any-

body because I'm not confident that they are able to hold enough space or have the ability to be able to give it full understanding.

BB: How did the support and environment at the Liberation Paddle Out help you overcome your fears or anxieties about being in the ocean as a beginner?

NIVENS: It was a day that was about freedom and liberation from the fears and whatever other things that might hold a human back from being able to experience life to the fullest. It was an environment where it was easy for me to be vulnerable. There was so much help and assistance and support. It was almost like, "That's exactly what this event is for." And so I didn't feel like I was a burden or like I was going to take away from somebody else's experience because I wasn't as good as them.

I was able to let go of some of that fear so that I could actually take in the experience. I think that kind of support, the vibe of the day, and seeing so many other bodies out there like mine with similar experience and being inspired by bodies like mine that had a lot more experience.

BB: When checking in over coffee post-LPO about your experience you confidently said, “Unless that level of invitation is met with that level of support, it’s not going to happen.” Can you explain what you meant by that?

NIVENS: Unique histories shape unique experiences when it comes to exposure to water and beach culture, and without an intimate understanding of those types of histories, experiences and levels of fears and insecurities built around those narratives, it’s hard for someone to step outside of those barriers to make yourself vulnerable enough to accept that invitation.

But to have an invitation with the level of support that was offered at the LPO was incredible because it spoke to my fears and the fact that I didn’t grow up in a beach culture. It spoke to the fact that maybe there were other factors that felt limiting to me in terms of access to the beach. There’s a lot of localism involved in surfing and it seems very territorial. And some of the territorialism seems maybe local, but a lot of it also seems to be sometimes blurred along color lines.

So the LPO, to me, was the perfect opportunity to accept an invitation that seemed genuine and spoke to all the fears and hesitations that somebody that hasn’t been in the water before would have. I was intrigued, fascinated, and liberated because of how much went into making that event special and welcoming for people like myself.

BB: What feelings came up for you?

NIVENS: Freedom. And when I say freedom, I mean liberation from the fears that we create within ourselves that hold us back. Not to mention the fear that sometimes is accompanied with societal constructs that exacerbate those fears. To be liberated from all the things that had kept me out of the water. And to feel that it was possible and what it felt like to be held by the water. To be able to experience that intimate relationship with something that’s 70% a part of me that I’ve been so afraid of. Usually any time I’m in it there’s so much stress and like tension fighting the water, but to just be able to float out there.

I just kept thinking; “I would love for this to be more than just a one-time experience in my life.” And, “Wow,” I can see why people do that. This is so amazing.’

BB: That feeling of floating and surrendering and the ways that our experience with the ocean or nature often mirror the challenges we have in our lives is something we talk about a lot in our programs. Do you feel like you overcame any emotions or feelings during the LPO that can be applied to your everyday life?

NIVENS: I came to the realization and acknowledgement that all that I need is already here. I didn’t need to become anything or go through any series of events to be able to experience the water that way. So many times I am held back from doing things because I feel like I’m not ready for it, I have to do something to prepare myself, I’m not good enough to do it yet or I’m not ready for it yet. So, it was a great example that sometimes my own reservations and my own feelings, and me not acknowledging all my gifts that are already there, holds me back from things. And on the same note, that I don’t have to be bound by those fears or narratives that have kept me from claiming and holding space that I deserve because it’s a part of this Earth that we live on, and I don’t have to write myself off from any space. That’s huge and I think it’s a reflection of life, society and overcoming fears—indoctrination, and narratives, too. Holding space to be confident and to thrive and to flourish and to be able to have a relationship with everything that’s in this world and not limit myself.

BB: What role do you think Black Surf Santa Cruz and events like the Liberation Paddle Out play in making ocean spaces more accessible and welcoming?

NIVENS: I think it could change the entire trajectory of someone’s life. Had 11-year-old Lil’ Kel been exposed to any of the things that Black Surf Santa Cruz is doing or an LPO, my entire trajectory of my life and my relationship with water would be changed. It changed at 56, and I just think what it would have been like to live my entire life without a lot of the fears and

reservations that I’ve held onto about water. Black Surf Santa Cruz is changing things by creating a culture where there wasn’t one.

IN CLOSING:

Nivins and I are now chatting about the possibility of adult swim lessons coming to fruition so he can continue to deepen and expand his own relationship with water and the ocean. He says he is excited to eventually join Black Surf Santa Cruz at one of our Pop Up Program (PUP) community surf lessons and to continue to work on expanding his nonprofit Project Daraja. Learn more about Project Daraja and find ways to support.

<https://www.projectdaraja.org/>

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