

RECLAIMING OCEAN JOY: A Conversation With Cyrus Howard

By Bella Bonner, Founder & Executive Director of Black Surf Santa Cruz



Photo Credit: Tyler Fox

Growing up in Santa Cruz County, surrounded by towering redwoods and the vast Monterey Bay, you might assume nature is accessible to everyone. But for many Black residents, like Cyrus (they/them), the outdoors never felt like an open invitation.

"I had some fear of the water and wasn't a strong swimmer, but I always loved playing in pools. I was more of an inside kid. Growing up, I wasn't really encouraged to go outside, get dirty and play — because that comes with a level of risk. Plus, with two parents working full time, there just wasn't a lot of time to get me to those places," they recalled.

The fear wasn't just about the water — it was about belonging. The Black experience in Santa Cruz, a predominantly white community on Amah Mutsun land, often comes with feelings of exclusion. The simple act of stepping into a new space — whether a hiking trail, a mountain biking route, or the ocean — can be weighed down by years of history, discrimination and a deep-rooted sense of not belonging.

That changed for Cyrus in 2021 when they attended their first Liberation Paddle Out with Black Surf Santa Cruz (BSSC). It was a pivotal moment in expanding their relationship with the outdoors — and with themselves.

"My first time on the ocean ever," they said. "Not just standing at the waves, but being in it." Surrounded by other Black and Brown community members, the experience was transformative. "I wasn't a strong paddler or swimmer but I knew I had support. I wasn't alone. And that changed everything."

CREATING A SPACE FOR BELONGING

I founded Black Surf Santa Cruz to address the systemic exclusion of Black and BIPOC individuals from outdoor and ocean recreation. From segregation laws that once banned Black people from public pools and beaches to housing deeds that excluded Black and Indigenous people — and the modern-day microaggressions and gatekeeping that persist — the barriers run deep.

BSSC's mission isn't just about teaching people how to surf; it's about healing generational trauma, reclaiming space and fostering joy in the outdoors. It's about representation and ensuring

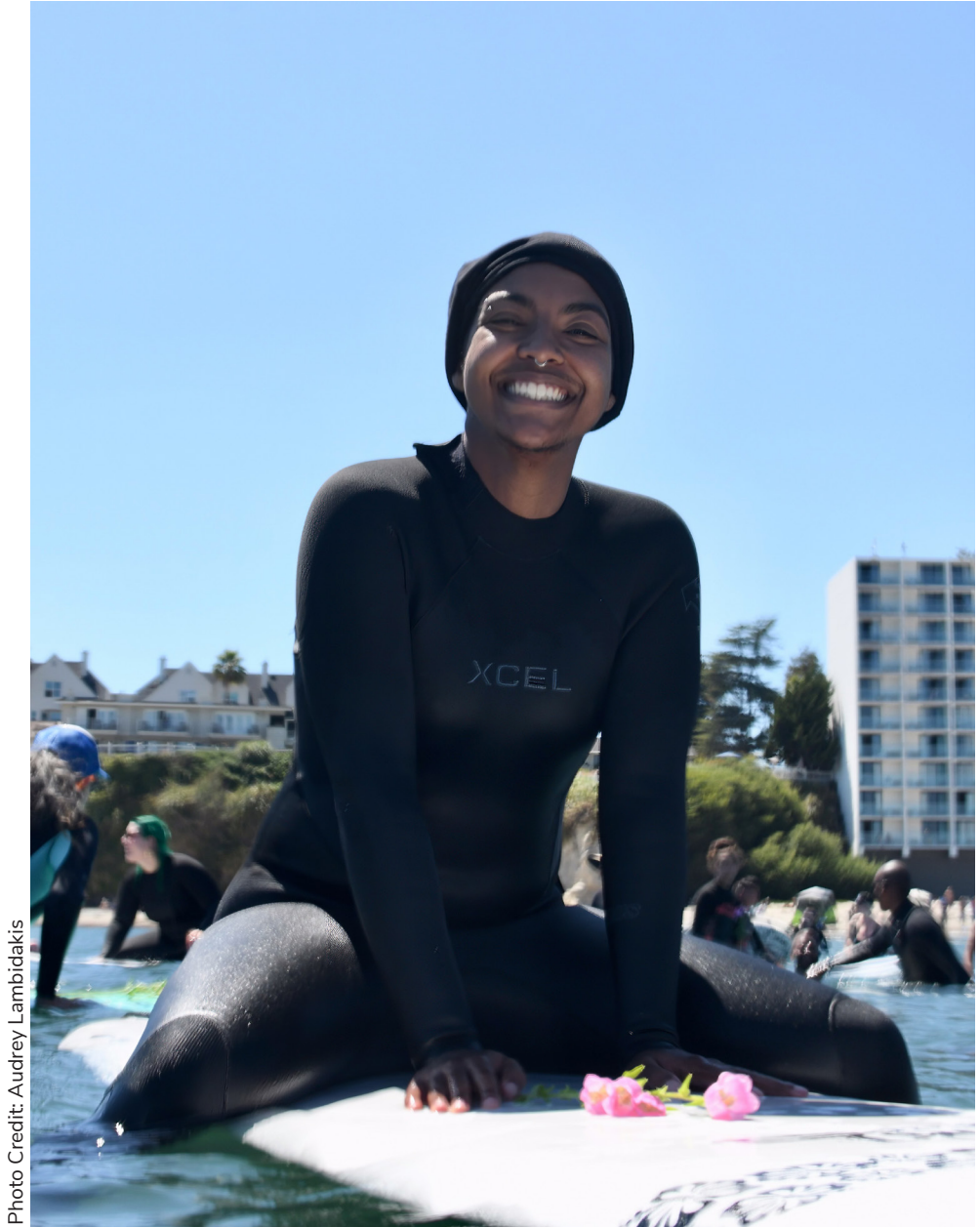


Photo Credit: Audrey Lambidakis

the next generation of Black children in Santa Cruz doesn't have to question whether they belong in the ocean.

Cyrus's story is proof of that impact.

After that first paddle out, they were hooked. They joined BSSC's inaugural Prepare to Pop-Up Program cohort — a structured course designed to equip beginners with fundamental ocean skills, safety knowledge and, most importantly, confidence.

"There's something powerful about growing through fear together. We were all marching out there, scared but grateful for the experience afterward. I

learned so much — about tides, safety and just getting comfortable in the water. The Prepare to Pop-Up cohort gave me the confidence to explore new activities, like mountain biking and hiking, proving that I can learn a new skill and embrace being a beginner."

FROM FEAR TO FREEDOM

For Cyrus, reconnecting with nature has meant reclaiming joy.

"There's so much healing in being outside," they explained. "And it's not just physical. It's mental, emotional, spiritual. The ocean has been a place of trauma for Black people — from the

transatlantic slave trade to segregation. But it's also a place of healing. And I've felt that firsthand."

Through BSSC, Cyrus found the courage to step into the ocean and discovered a community that uplifted them every step of the way. "We have a group chat from our cohort. We surf together. We lend each other gear. That kind of support system? That's everything."

CHANGING THE NARRATIVE

Cyrus's story is one of many. Each paddle out, every lesson and every shared wave is a step toward rewriting the narrative of who belongs in the ocean.

For anyone hesitant, for anyone who

has ever felt like the ocean wasn't theirs to claim, Cyrus has a message: "You don't need to be an expert. You just need to show up. There's a community here that will catch you."

Black Surf Santa Cruz is doing more than just getting people into the water — we're creating a movement, one wave at a time.

ABOUT BLACK SURF SANTA CRUZ

Since 2020, Black Surf Santa Cruz (BSSC) has created intentional, inclusive and supportive environments for Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) within ocean and outdoor recreation spaces. Our mission is to promote physical, spiritual, emotional and communal healing through surf-

ing, education and recreation. In our programming, we center Black community members and other historically and presently excluded people of color, adhering to the guiding principle, "Let's learn together." This principle invites the entire Santa Cruz County community to join us in creating anti-racist surf, ocean recreation and marine sustainability spaces. Learn more at www.blacksurfsanta-cruz.org.

Save the date for our 5th Annual Liberation Paddle Out on June 15, 2025!

