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Surf Your Fear: Texas Lawyer Turned Surfer/ Entrepreneur Ashley Blaylock Shares What It Takes To Live Your Dream (Hint: It's Outside Your Comfort Zone)

FEBRUARY 11, 2014 | KATHERINEROCHELEAU | ASHLEY BLAYLOCK, CAMP BELLA, CHICABRAVA, PRO SURFING, SURF NICARAGUA, WOMEN'S SURFING | LEAVE A COMMENT


(http://betheherodotco.files.wordpress.com/2014/02/ashleyonwave.jpg)

(Ashley Blaylock, images courtesy of chicabrava.com)

Bethehero.co is a space to celebrate the power of storytelling and what it means to be the hero of your own life story. Everyday I find inspiration in unknown heroes— people who find a way to merge their dreams and their unique gifts in a way that contributes to the greater good. To me, being the hero of your own life story is also about having the courage to re-write your story as many times as it takes—to leave the safety of the life you know, in order to create the life of your dreams.

I usually find my inspiration when I'm not looking. Case in point, I first discovered this week's unsung hero while researching warm weather surf destinations to help me beat my annual winter blues. In addition to a sunny surf getaway I found something even better—an inspiring message from lawyer-turned-surfer / entrepreneur Ashley Blaylock, CEO and Founder of Chicabrava, a surf camp for women of all ages and abilities. I read Ashley's story and was immediately hooked.

Ashley left a prestigious law career in Texas in order to follow her dream —merging her passions for surfing and business to found Chicabrava. When Ashley first came to Nicaragua, the local surfer guys hadn't yet surfed with any girls. Surprised that a girl could actually surf too, and not just the boys, they'd yell out "ay…chica brava" ("brave girl") when they'd see her in the water. After experiencing how surfing gave her the confidence to face her fears in the water and in life, Ashley knew what she wanted to do with her future—create an environment for women to surf with other women, and provide the support and motivation to help other women develop the confidence to

achieve their goals in surfing and in life. At the same time, Ashley continue to take her surfing to the next level—competing around the world, and earning six titles as Nicaragua's National Surf Champion.

Now Ashley and her Chicabrava team have taken their passion one step further by creating Camp Bella, a non-profit surf camp held annually to help local Nicaraguan women who have been victims of sex trafficking. Not only has Ashley found a way to live her dream, but she also found a way to use her dream to help improve the lives of others. But if you were to ask Ashley, it's all just part of being a chica brava.

Ashley took the time to share with me what motivates her to be the hero of her own story, how she overcomes fear, and why surfing can help you achieve your goals outside of the water.


(http://betheherodotco.files.wordpress.com/2014/02/ashley_staff.jpg)

(Ashley Blaylock. Images courtesy of chicabrava.com)

What was the most difficult obstacle in leaving a law career—something you worked so hard to achieve—to follow your dream of surfing?

Well, financial security was the first and most obvious concern. But I would say that the most difficult fear to overcome was the fear of what would happen when I left the prestige of a law career—a very stable path that comes with a lot of accolades in many places—and follow my passion for surfing—a sport perceived as risky and dangerous.

But at the same time, I believe everything happens for a reason. And my training in law prepared me with the discipline, work ethic, and knowledge that helped me succeed in starting my own business. The law opened a lot of doors for me. I wouldn't change the path I have taken for anything.

Why Nicaragua? Why would I sign up for a surf camp there versus- I don't know- Costa Rica?

One major reason is the location of Chicabrava—the southern pacific coast of Nicaragua. We have a phenomenon created by the lake there that creates off shore winds as a constant almost every day of the year. Offshore winds are what surfers live for. Our location is the only place I know which has offshore winds more than 300 days a year. The conditions created are perfect for all levels of surfing. At the same time I feel you get more of an authentic culture experience—because of a large local presence here—that surpasses what you can get with more tourist centric locations like Costa Rica. I mean, don't get me wrong, there is a strong tourist industry in Nicaragua. I just think the whole experience here is more authentic and diverse than other destinations.

Is the political climate a concern? Any scary moments where you were in over your head?

There was a civil war that ended more than twenty years ago—and the last two decades have been ones of transition and peace. I've lived and worked here more than ten years, and have never had a problem. A lot of people assume, based on bits and pieces of stories they remember, or something their parents told them, that Nicaragua is dangerous. But if you read about the history of Nicaragua in the last thirty years, you'll understand why it's safe.

(For a more in depth explanation of the political background of Nicaragua, go to Ashley's site, Chicabrava.com)

Who are your heroes? Who inspires you?

What's interesting is that Chicabrava brings together women of all ages and backgrounds from all over the world, with one common purpose—surfing. The women who show up constantly inspire me at our camps. I especially admire the older women—women in their 50s, 60s and 70s—who come to us ready to learn to surf or improve their surfing ability. So far this year we have had two seventy-year old women that came to surf! It's not uncommon. It teaches me that if these women can challenge themselves to learn, grow, and change, then I have no excuse!

My grandmother also inspired me. She was and remains such a force in my life. She was very progressive and way ahead of her time. When I first bought the domain name for Chicabrava, I sat on it for a while, and just let life get in the way. When she died, it reminded me that you really

only get one shot in life and you have to take every minute you can and live to the fullest. I realized I wasn't doing what I really wanted to do, and she inspired me to go for it.

All heroes have a soundtrack to their story. What's the soundtrack to your life lately? What songs motivate you to kick ass?

That's funny! My surf instructors ask our participants the same question. It helps get your mind in the game. In my previous years, I would have answered that my theme song was Gloria Gaynor's " I Will Survive." It's a total anthem and very girl power, and it also fit me at the time because I was the young upstart with something to prove. But recently I've gone through so many great changes. I built my business, I got married to a great guy, and I just had a son. I'm in this phase of total fun, gratitude, and amazement at it all. So I'd say a good theme song for right now would be Lionel Richie's "All Night Long." It's just a hilarious, upbeat, fun song. And also, my baby has me up all night long these days so the song just works on all levels!

You have so much going on. How do you find balance and do you ever get time to surf for just you?

Yeah, it's funny I was just thinking that the other day—where did my "me time" go? I knew a lot was going to change when I got pregnant, so I made sure to make the time count, and I got in a good amount of surfing. These days it's all about being a good mom, partner, and running Chicabrava, so I have had to reprioritize. I'd say the most difficult challenge has been accepting and working with the changes in my body since having my son. Fitness and exercise have always been a big part of my life, and it's crucial to my surfing. But the time I now enjoy with my son—learning and growing and challenging myself in new ways as a mother makes it all worth it. With Chicabrava I had to learn to do adjust, delegate, and manage my time more effectively. But because of these challenges, my staff has really risen to the occasion and stepped into leadership roles, giving them a chance to blossom. So every challenge is really an opportunity. I'm the kind of person that's motivated by obstacles, not discouraged.

How do you start your days?

Before I had my son, I would start my day by checking emails and surf with my girls. Now, my days start with nursing and pumping, nursing and pumping. And then I really take it day by day according to what the focus is that day. It's a new era!

What helps you get back on track after a set back? What helps you break through fear inside and outside of the water?

I'd say the most effective thing I do when I'm in the grips of fear is to visualize the worst-case scenario. I literally play out all the possibilities in my head, talk myself through them, and then ask myself if I can survive the very worst. If the honest answer is yes, I go for it. Whether it's facing a set of really big waves, or facing a challenge in other areas of my life, I've got to name the fear before I decide what I want to do. If you know you can survive the worst, then you know you will be ok no matter. But unless you name and contemplate what the fear is, the fear will linger.

Looking back on those first few years, is there anything you would have done differently?

To be honest, I thought about every step along the way so much, there isn't much I would change. But I have learned to include more employee appreciation activities—to treat your employees with the same level of excellence you treat your clients. In the beginning I was so stressed out starting a new business and I just learned as I went. I learned that you have to make sure your team is fully on board with your mission and your vision. You can't expect them to execute and to show up stoked for the day unless you are stoked, and you lead the way. At the same time, everyone needs to feel appreciated and valued, so balancing clear expectations with appreciation has been an important lesson for me.



(http://betheherodotco.files.wordpress.com/2014/02/surfgroup2.jpg)

(Surf camp. Images courtesy of chicabrava.com)

Helping other women overcome adversity and heal is obviously one of your great passions. How did Camp Bella and how did it evolve?

Camp Bella is a non-profit surf camp week we hold once a year. It's a weeklong surfing experience camp for women who are rescued from prostitution. Camp Bella has been such an amazing part of the Chicabrava experience, a chance for us to give back and empower other women.



(http://betheherodotco.files.wordpress.com/2014/02/camp-bella-1.jpg)

(Images courtesy of chicabrava.com)

What is it about surfing (versus other therapeutic activities) in particular that is so healing?

Surfing, unlike a lot of sports, really parallels life in a lot of ways. You can't control the waves, the weather, and the conditions. You might have your own plan but the ocean will throw you a different plan. In life, when you put yourself out of your comfort zone, that's when real growth and learning happens. Surfing is such a tangible example of that. When women come to learn to surf here, overcoming their mental and physical obstacles to learn to surf, they develop this inner strength that helps them in other areas of their life as well.

The women's' surf industry has caught a lot of flack in the last few years for—as some would argue—taking the focus off the sport and into a "sex sells" mentality. Or maybe it was always that way and lately it just seems to be getting worse? Some ads look more like a Victoria Secret commercials than

an empowering or informative surf promotion. What's your perspective? What would you like to see more of/ less of? Do you think it's an issue at all?

I don't like the sexualization of surfing, but it's not surprising, and I don't think it's going away any time soon. Like in many other industries, sex sells. It's just the same watered down objectification of women that is pervasive in our culture.That said, I'm not going to waste my energy complaining about it. I can acknowledge it, and use my energy to focus on helping women that have truly felt the effects of objectification—like with Camp Bella.

On the flipside, I don't think that a women's surf apparel company needs to shy away from femininity. They don't need to try and force a female surfing image into a "dude" box. Men who surf are men. Women who surf are women. We don't all have to look a certain way to embrace the femininity of the women's surf culture. We should embrace that—whatever it means to us.

Being the hero of your own story means motivating and challenging yourself to grow outside your comfort zone. What do you see yourself doing in ten years?

I definitely want to grow the Chicabrava brand. I was in the process of developing my expansion plan when I got pregnant, and I want to return to it when it works time wise.

Any places you have not surfed yet that you are dying to try?

I really want to surf Australia.

What do you say to others who are struggling—stuck in making the leap from living in the comfort zone to living their best life?

Realize that we only have one shot at this life. Take advantage of the time you have been given so that you don't look back and regret. Think through the worse case scenario, and then ask yourself if you can live with it. If you can, go for it and don't look back. You know, I really believe that there are enough differences in the world so that we could all do what we want to do, and still be diverse, still have room to grow. So don't look for the reasons NOT to do something if your afraid too many people are already doing it.

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