

# The healing waves of surfing

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Spencer Fox (center, in blue shirt) poses with friends, family, and staff of Ocean Healing Group at the Shaka Beach Retreat in Costa Rica. *Credit: Larry Benarth*

One chilly afternoon atop a Utah mountain, 15-year old Spencer Fox's life changed. While snowboarding, Spencer caught an edge on his board and catapulted head first into a rock-hard snow bank. This tragic accident broke Spencer's neck, crushing his spine in two places.

Now, two years later, Spencer lives his life as a quadriplegic suffering paralysis in all four of his limbs. Most days are spent bustling between school and rehab, slowly seeing improvements but learning they come with time and through a will only he knows.

The accident took a lot away from Spencer, but his adventurous cravings and thirst for life did not die on that mountain. As chance would have it, a spirit that could have been broken, awoke to a life full of possibilities and endless adventures.

Through the help of an organization called [Ocean Healing Group](#), Spencer has reclaimed every kid's inherent need to get stoked. OHG gives youths with disabilities and spinal cord injuries, the opportunity to participate in surfing and other high risk sports, as well as travel.

A few times a year, OHG travels to the [Shaka Beach Retreat](#) in Costa Rica where they not only surf, but sail through the air on zip-lines, and tackle hilly terrain on ATVs.

With the aid of skilled volunteers and adaptive equipment, kids whose lives are mostly focused on the burden of simply getting around, have the opportunity to relax, have fun and enjoy adrenaline pumping activities in a tropical paradise.

Last summer while covering [US Open of Surfing](#) in Huntington Beach, I caught a glimpse of these unique young athletes in action. As if the ocean isn't inspirational enough, add a few kids who live with disabilities and put them on an adaptable surfboard and the ocean becomes something beyond exceptional.

Spencer, who is a sophomore at [San Dieguito Academy](#) in Encinitas, recently took the time to talk to me about his life, the excitement of being active, and Ocean Healing Group.

## **How has the surf camp and Ocean Healing Group changed you?**

**Spencer Fox:** *My week at Shaka made the world a bigger place. It makes me realize that I could do everything I want to.*

## **What's your favorite part about surfing?**

*We live near the beach, so I grew up in the water – bodysurfing and boogie boarding. Now, I love the water because of the buoyancy.*

*Since my accident, I've surfed a few times with [Wheels2Water](#) and [Life Rolls On](#) at their day long events, but each adaptive surfer only gets 30 to 45 minutes in the water, sometimes less. So Costa Rica was an opportunity for me to get in the water once or twice a day and to surf for a much longer time.*

*My favorite part of surfing is that it's fast. Being on a surfboard provides speed, freedom and an element of risk and adventure. I had some pretty awesome wipeouts! Truthfully, surfing is just fun.*

## **What is the hardest part about surfing now?**

*Asking for help is by far the most difficult part of this injury. At Shaka, the volunteers want to help, and I never feel bad about needing assistance.*

## **What's been your favorite part of the surf camp so far.**

*My favorite part was just all of it. I really liked zip-lining over the jungle. I was never scared and I loved going fast. I also really liked learning to drive a quad because I could do it by myself and they go pretty fast too.*

*Also, I like the excitement of traveling to another country. I have never been to Costa Rica before. The people in our group were the best part too because they made the whole adventure possible.*

## **What's your favorite surf experience?**

*The second to last day we were at the camp we went out surfing and I caught the biggest wave ever. It was so rad. It was just as much fun as before my accident and just as exhilarating.*

*I got munched pretty bad by a big set of waves. I got tumbled hard and had to hold my breath for a long time. When I surfaced my rash guard was only on one arm. But I survived... and caught more waves!*

## **Has surfing inspired you to do other things?**

*Definitely. I want to get my own custom surfboard and I want to go in the water even more. I definitely want to travel more. I think Fiji sounds really nice.*

## **I'm with you on that. What has surfing taught you about yourself?**

*I can still do anything. Maybe not the same, and maybe not by myself, but with help I can do anything I set my mind to.*

## **What are your life goals?**

*Right now, I just want to finish high school and get into a good college. I don't know what I want to be yet, but I like math and science. I also really want to go skydiving.*

**That's awesome. What can you tell those who may be thinking of donating their time and/or money to Ocean Healing Group.**

*This is a great cause. It helps people in wheelchairs do things they would never get to do otherwise. And all the people who volunteered at our camp had a great time too. They are our friends now, more like family, and we plan to see them again. There just isn't anything else like it.*

Obviously Spencer's life has changed. His body has changed, and how he moves about definitely has changed. But, bringing action sports back into his life has helped him rediscover the courage and confidence that all young athletes should have.

If you are interested in knowing more about Ocean Healing Group or donating time or money, [visit their website](#) for more information. Also, check out this [mini-documentary on YouTube](#).

I would like to thank Larry Benarth for his help in contributing to this article.



Savanna Litchman sets up to catch a wave. OHG offers trained staff and adaptive surfboards as a way to give challenged athletes a chance to ride the healing waves of the ocean. *Credit: Photos supplied by Larry Benarth*



Jacob (“J-Bomb”) Benarth hangs out on the shore of Costa Rica. From left: Ruby Fox, Margot Lindsey, Summer Beault, Rachael Hernandez, Liz Hermosa, Celia Brewer. *Credit: Photos supplied by Larry Benarth*



Spencer enjoyed Costa Rica with his sister Ruby and mom Celia. “Being on a surfboard provides speed, freedom and an element of risk,” says Spencer. *Credit: Photos supplied by Larry Benarth*



OHG offers other high-risk activities such as zip-lining. “The help and encouragement that OHG gives to each individual is life-changing,” says mom Renny Abicca. *Credit: Photos supplied by Larry Benarth*



Joey Abicca was a competitive surfer before his accident. “Hearing Joey say ‘I had my first cutback in two and half years was a great moment,” says mom Renny. From left: Annie Abicca, Joey, Renny Abicca, Christiann Bailey. *Credit: Photos supplied by Larry Benarth*



The skilled staff of OHG are like family to the young surfers. Here Grant Kobayashi accompanies “J-Bomb” Benarth down to the shore for a much needed adrenaline rush. *Credit: Photos supplied by Larry Benarth*



“Speaking as a mom of a disabled son, this camp has really shown Joey and our whole family that being in a wheelchair does not limit his ability to travel, surf, and experience adventures,” says Renny Abicca, here on the zip-line with Joey. *Credit: Photos supplied by Larry Benarth*



“This experience opens minds and builds confidence in the kids,” Renny Abicca adds. Here Jacob Benarth prepares for another new adventure. *Credit: Photos supplied by Larry Benarth*



If it's written in the sand, it must be true! November's JAWS (Just Add Water Surfing), the Costa Rica event offered by Ocean Healing Group, was the last trip of the year. More trips and events are planned for 2012. *Credit: Photos supplied by Larry Benarth*