

# ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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## Surf therapy helps CHOC kids get relief from the ocean in Newport Beach



Alex Hays gets encouragement from instructor Bobby Friedman catch while surfing at the Newport Beach pier in Newport Beach, CA on Friday, August 10, 2018 during an event for former and current cancer patients and their families from Children's Hospital of Orange County. The event was a collaboration between Waves of Impact and Miracles for Kids. (Photo by Paul Bersebach, Orange County Register/SCNG)

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Alex Hays' index finger stretched towards the surf, pointing to the ocean horizon. It was a signal to the group surrounding him that's where he wanted to be, that he wasn't ready to head back to the sand.

Alex, 10, was one of a handful of Children's Hospital of Orange County patients who got to feel the thrill of surfing on Friday. They were at an event organized by non-profits Waves of Impact and [Miracles for Kids](#) to use the sport of surfing to bring smiles to people who have had struggles in their lives.

"Surfing is one of my favorite things, and most therapeutic thing in my life," said volunteer Jason Jackson, of San Clemente. "So it's awesome when you can pass on that on to someone else, especially these kids — kids that haven't seen the ocean, or had to concentrate on much more serious things in life.

"Even if it's just for a day, it's awesome. The ocean is one of the most therapeutic things in the world."

Josh Harper, a surfer who founded [Waves of Impact](#) with Keith Lovgren about eight years ago, puts on several surf-centric events through the year for various groups, whether it be wounded warriors, children on the autistic spectrum, or teaming with Miracles for Kids, a group that helps CHOC patients who are facing financial hardships.

"There's such a demand out there for programs like this," Harper said. "For kids with autism, the waves help with sensory issues. You can see there's a change when they are surfing.

"For a lot of the families, their kids don't do traditional sports. With surfing, they can cheer their kids on when they come in, there's really a special feeling."

"We all surf because of how it makes us feel," he added. "It's a great way to give back to these kids and to share the feeling and stoke of why we surf."

## Shared experience

It was a day not just for the CHOC patients, but for their families. Siblings and cousins took to the water to catch waves and share in the experience.

“We just want to provide a nice day for a whole family at the beach,” Harper said. “So much attention does get put on the kid who is getting treatment. We just want to include everybody.”

For the kids who do spend their lives in and out of hospitals, they just want normalcy, he said.

“It’s so crazy how positive these kids are. Some kids don’t know any different, they’ve been going to the hospital their whole lives,” Harper said. “It’s a never ending battle.”

Tom Swanecamp, a board member with Miracles for Kids, said the goal of the group is to provide financial support to families near or below the poverty line who have a child with a life-threatening disease, oftentimes cancer.

“They already are having a hard time making ends meet, then one of their kids are diagnosed, then usually they have to stop working,” he said.

A day at the beach mean things many of us take for granted — transportation, fuel, towels, water, sunblock — not to mention the energy it takes. If you want to surf, you have to get a board and instructor, with lessons typically costing upwards of \$200.

“It’s crazy to think you can live in Orange County and we take the beach for granted. It’s really special to share that with them, especially after everything they’ve been through,” Swanecamp said.

## ‘At peace’

Deanna Wright, Alex’s mother, said her world changed when Alex was just three months old and it was discovered his body wasn’t producing red blood cells.

“No one knew about it. We woke up with a healthy kid. By the end of the day, he was in cardiac arrest,” she said.

The incident caused severe brain damage that caused him to not be able to speak, and have autism-like behaviors. Alex received a bone marrow transplant when he was two years old that saved his life, but since then the journey hasn’t been easy.

Wright quit her job to care for him full time. They lived in a long-term hotel for a while until funds ran out. Then they lived out of their car, turned away from homeless shelters because of Alex’s condition.

Six years ago, Wright entered the grant program through Miracles for Kids and moved into the Miracle Manor, a 12-unit, rent-free apartment, until they saved enough money to move out and put a down payment on a condo.

“That’s what Miracles have given us,” she said.

They’ve been joining the surf outings for a few years, and at the last event Wright said she was even able to stand up on a wave — though she joked that she’s fearful of what lurks beneath.

She looked out to Alex, who was mesmerized by the ocean as waves slapped his shins.

“Alex is at peace right now,” Wright said. “He’s so peaceful. He wants to stay here and watch it, and be one with nature.”



1 of 7 | Alex Hays, 10, and his mom, Deanna Wright, have a laugh while playing in the water at the Newport Beach pier in Newport Beach, CA on Friday, August 10, 2018 during an event for former and current cancer patients and their families from Children’s Hospital of Orange County. The event was a collaboration between Waves of Impact and Miracles for Kids. (Photo by Paul Bersebach, Orange County Register/SCNG)



2 of 7 | Ivan Santos and instructor Bobby Friedman catch a wave at the Newport Beach pier in Newport Beach, CA on Friday, August 10, 2018 during an event for former and current cancer patients and their families from Children’s Hospital of Orange County. The event was a collaboration between Waves of Impact and Miracles for Kids. (Photo by Paul Bersebach, Orange County Register/SCNG)



3 of 7 | Manuel Miranda is congratulated by two instructors as he surfed at the Newport Beach pier in Newport Beach, CA on Friday, August 10, 2018 during an event for former and current cancer patients and their families from Children’s Hospital of Orange County. The event was a collaboration between Waves of Impact and Miracles for Kids. (Photo by Paul Bersebach, Orange County Register/SCNG)



4 of 7 | Adrian Santos, 5, practices surfing while onshore before going out to the waves at Newport Beach, CA on Friday, August 10, 2018. A collaboration between Waves of Impact and Miracles for Kids let current and former CHOC (Children’s Hospital of Orange County) cancer patients and their families spend the morning surfing. (Photo by Paul Bersebach, Orange County Register/SCNG)



5 of 7 | Alex Hays gets a high-five from instructor Bobby Friedman catch while surfing at the Newport Beach pier in Newport Beach, CA on Friday, August 10, 2018 during an event for former and current cancer patients and their families from Children’s Hospital of Orange County. The event was a collaboration between Waves of Impact and Miracles for Kids. (Photo by Paul Bersebach, Orange County Register/SCNG)



6 of 7 | Manuel Miranda gets a wave at Newport Beach, CA on Friday, August 10, 2018 during an event for former and current cancer patients and their families from Children’s Hospital of Orange County. The event was a collaboration between Waves of Impact and Miracles for Kids. (Photo by Paul Bersebach, Orange County Register/SCNG)



7 of 7 | Alex Hays gets encouragement from instructor Bobby Friedman catch while surfing at the Newport Beach pier in Newport Beach, CA on Friday, August 10, 2018 during an event for former and current cancer patients and their families from Children's Hospital of Orange County. The event was a collaboration between Waves of Impact and Miracles for Kids. (Photo by Paul Bersebach, Orange County Register/SCNG)