

Kim

swims to the other side of darkness

by Claire Delahunty



Staring across the calm water of the Sacramento River, Kim took a big, deep breath. Playing with the strap of her goggles, she looked at the people standing on the boat with her. People who loved her.

It felt good to be looking at the wide-open water, with all these special people standing at her back. Kim smiled at her mum, who smiled back, big and warm, and gave her two thumbs up. Kim gave two thumbs up as well, but stayed quiet, listening to the air going in and out of her lungs. These past few days Kim and her friends and family and trainer had been doing a lot of talking.

They had talked about hours and miles.

"93 miles, Kim!" her dad had said, and it sent a little shiver down her spine.

"We'll be right alongside you."

"It might take you 30 hours, or longer," her swimming friend, Vito, said.

"That's longer than you've ever been in the water non-stop before."

They had looked at maps together and studied the waterways Kim would be swimming to get from Sacramento's peaceful river into the ocean to the west of San Francisco Bay in America. They had discussed the icy sea water and how windy it might be, and the sharks that might be out there in the deep, swimming near her.

Kim didn't feel scared about that. She had swum where sharks were before. She had seen the amazing sight of dolphins leaping around her. That's what made it so special.

What was scaring her was the thought of failing. She was trying something so big, what if she didn't make it? This would be a record swim, and everyone was watching. She had already been interviewed by the newspapers, curious to know more about this woman about to swim solo, out in the open water for so many miles.

"Why do you do it?" someone had asked.

Kim was always happy to explain, because she had so many answers.

"I do it for a very special charity," Kim would tell them. And she would talk about raising money for people like her grandfather, and many other younger people who have come home back a war and need to be supported when they return home.

"I do it because I am grateful," she would say, remembering the feeling of waking up in hospital after emergency surgery on her leg. The doctors almost had to amputate it.

"It took me two years to learn to walk again, and then I discovered the freedom of swimming in the ocean. I swim far and wide and have all these adventures in the water because I have so much gratitude for the people who saved my leg," she would say.

And finally, she would tell them: "I do it because I've discovered what my body can do. This body once swam from Scotland to Ireland, without stopping! I am so lucky to have it," she would say.

Kim jumped as someone started to slather thick lanolin cream all over her arms and legs—every bit of skin poking out of her swim-suit. She would need to be covered in this extra, greasy layer to help guard against the freezing water she would be swimming in very soon. When that was done, she looked like a long pastry covered in sticky icing, and she laughed as her mum came up to give her a final hug, trying not to touch all the goop. And then just like that, it was time. With a smooth jump and a quiet splash, Kim slid into the water and another adventure began!

She swam in her usual steady stroke, practicing her breathing and setting a comfortable pace. She knew the boat would be following along with her, but already she was just listening to the water.

Other things faded away. This world was different to the one on land.

Hours passed by as Kim kept swimming, and her mind started to flip through memories and moments from her life. She could remember hopping into the swimming pool when she was a kid, learning how to swim. She almost forgot to turn her head to a different side for her next breath as she laughed at the memory of her terrible swimming! She had been so bad at it, and no one ever picked Kim to swim in important races for the school sports.

She had only started swimming properly a few years ago - and look at her now! Kim was smiling as she moved from the river system into the ocean water and felt the salty waves slap against her skin.

She could see dark clouds gathering whenever she turned her head to look at the sky, but she kept going in her usual determined way. The wind was whipping up too, and if she had been able to see her mother on board the support boat, Kim would have seen a very worried face.

Kicking her legs steadily and stroking out with her arms, she kept pushing her way through the waves, which were growing higher and higher. She could feel herself being tossed around, like a little cork, bobbing along.

She always felt pretty tiny when she was out on the open water, but she didn't mind at all. It was good to be reminded of how big and beautiful the world was. She was just one person, making a difference in her own small way. And if there's one thing she'd learned from the water: Mother Nature was always boss.

Back on land, Kim's dad called over the radio for an update.

"It's been almost 20 hours," they told him, "and it looks like we've got a bit of a storm coming. This could be pretty bad." Kim couldn't see their grim faces as she swam, but she was starting to feel a heavy weight settle on her muscles. Every time she lifted her arm over her head, it seemed to happen in slow motion.

She was driving ahead with all her strength, but it was becoming impossible to tell how much ground she was making.

She frowned a little as she had a worrying thought: "What if I'm not getting anywhere at all?!" But somewhere inside, a determined voice scolded her for thinking like that. "Always be positive!" it said. "If you think there's something that you can't do, that's when you should do it!"

This was her motto in life, and she was very stubborn too, so she tried to ignore the fact that the sea was now snarling and crashing around her. The water was usually like an old friend, but today it seemed to Kim that it was just a little bit cranky.

For the next four hours, Kim kept swimming, all the while feeling her body growing more and more tired. Her feet felt like lumps of wood, trailing behind her. Her breathing was getting shorter and water kept splashing into her mouth. Finally Kim turned towards the boat, paddling with her hands to float alongside.

"How far have I got to go?" Kim asked the worried faces lined up beside her. "You've gone 54 miles!" They shouted. "But you've barely moved in the last six hours." Kim winced as she thought about how hard she had been trying with her body, but she wasn't surprised at all.

"This storm keeps pushing me backwards," she yelled. "Is there any sign of it going away?" Looking again to the wind whipping the water, and the purple clouds on the horizon, Kim guessed that was a stupid question.

"It's not going to get any better," Kim's mum yelled. "We think you're going to have to pull out."

At those words, Kim braced herself for the anger and frustration she was pretty sure would come crashing down on her. But instead, a strange sort of lightness crept into her heart. What was going on? She had trained so hard. She had never failed to complete a swim before. She was not a quitter! But somehow it didn't feel like quitting. She could think about fighting on, but there was just nothing left in her body! She made her heavy arms swim the last few strokes to the boat.

As her family and friends helped her onto the deck she felt her legs turn to jelly. They always felt like this after so many hours in the water, but usually she was grinning from ear to ear, because she had reached her goal. Concerned faces looked at her as she sat down, wrapped in towels and shivering.

"You did so well, Kim!" her mother said, worry-lines creasing her forehead. "It was amazing!" her friend, Vito, said, and Kim could tell that he meant it. She took a deep breath and let her face break into a little smile. Someone laughed as they passed her a hot cup of tea. "You swam for over 24 hours, and you covered 54 miles. It's a record for you!" they said. Kim's smile spread even wider.

She had never failed to reach her goal before. She had always swum to her destination and been triumphant in the end. Once, failure was the scariest thing she could think of. But this didn't feel like failure.

All of her loved ones gathered around her as they turned the boat back towards land. She was never alone out here, she had all of these people watching her back and willing her to succeed. In the end, just because she didn't make it all the way to her destination, didn't mean she had failed.

Kim's mum wrapped her in a big hug and said some magical words.
"We're all so proud of you. We were so worried you would feel like you had failed."
Kim shook her head.

"I feel peaceful and happy, Mum," she said. "I think I've learned something totally new. Even if you don't get where you were aiming to go, you haven't failed. I reckon we've got it a bit mixed up. It's not about the very end, it's about what you do on the way. If you try your hardest, but you can't quite get there, you've still made it."

Her mum breathed out with relief and squeezed her daughter again.

"54 miles Kim, that's how far you swam in the wild open water. There's no such thing as failing at 54 miles!"

As she prepared to step back onto solid ground, Kim looked back at the water, feeling like the luckiest girl in the world.

"Now I know how strong I am," she whispered.

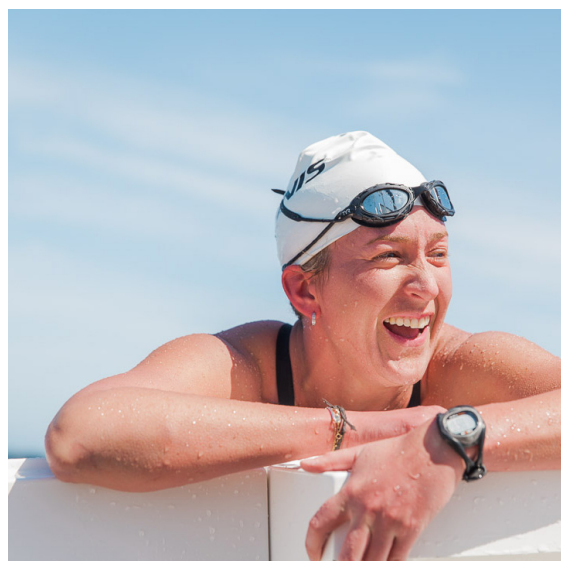
**"Strong enough to never stop trying,
even if I don't always make it to where I was going."**

Kim Chambers

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Kim Chambers

Kim Chambers grew up on a farm in New Zealand, but now she is a long-distance, open-water swimmer living by San Francisco Bay in America. She is one of only six people in the world to have completed the Oceans Seven challenge. After a terrible accident at the age of thirty, Kim started swimming, and discovered a remarkable connection to the open water.



In 2015, Kim became the first woman to swim the thirty miles between San Francisco Bay's Farallon Islands and the Golden Gate Bridge, raising money and awareness for her favourite charity. In September this year, weather conditions forced Kim to pull out over half way through a 93-mile nonstop swim from Sacramento to Tiburon, an experience that she says has helped to redefine her definition of failure.

Kim will always swim, but she lives a life open to all sorts of adventures. She never knows what might lie around the corner.

Thank you to #SisuGirl Kate Webber for her awesome photographs.

KateWebber.com

What is the biggest challenge you have faced?

When did you try something and not finish?

What do you tell yourself when you need to try again?
