

Wanted: wilderness; they bring their own courage

By Mary Gaar
Examiner Staff Writer

ON THE STANISLAUS RIVER — Will stood at the cliff's very edge, feeling with his toes for the place where rock fell away and space began. He listened for the water, 25 feet below, and thought fleetingly about how cold it was.

He listened to the quiet voice of the man who stood beside him, holding his hands five feet out from the face of the cliff where stony ledges and jutting rocks, the voice was severe. Will had to remember to push off hard enough to jump clear of them.

The guide let go of his hand and Will heard him step back. For Will, the world was hot sun, cold breeze and the sound of the river below. And the one spot on Earth where his feet still gripped the edge.

Then it was cool and push and nothing but space and blackness and Will had to remember which way was up until Sally hit the water on a bit of a forward incline but didn't feel the sting because it was cold, so cold.

He surfaced with the current and listened for his friends. "This way, Will," they were yelling. "Way to go!"

He forced his muscles to work against the cold of the river and turned his body in the direction of their voices. He bumped up against their rafts, rubber tubes and felt friendly hands hook him aboard, slapping him on the back.

Then those in the group who could see turned their eyes back to the edge of the cliff to watch Dan, who is legally blind, jump into his world of shadowy forms and rushing river.

Later that day, after the boatload of blind rafters had paddled and backed through half a dozen rapids, they stopped for lunch by the giant fig tree that spreads its branches over the Stanislaus River. They were still talking about the Jumping Rock. "I did not want jumping because I need to jump off the sides of ships into the ocean," said Will. That was in the Navy and Mercantile Marine, years before diabetes began stealing his vision. Now Will Lopez is 54, a grandfather and totally blind.

Dan Smith, who is 28 and can see blurry outlines of shapes when he wears his glasses, admitted feeling as frightened as he ever had when he stood at cliff's edge without aid.

But after he plunged and surfaced, he had a different mood. "Once I was out," quoting from the Cowardly Lion's speech in the Wizard of Oz, "I was taking the maddest ride I ever had."

For Dan, this was a repeat trip down the Stanislaus with his friends from Environmental Traveling Companions (ETC), a non-profit organization dedicated, according to its brochures, to providing "special" need people with access to the wilderness. "After the two-day rafting-camping adventure, the group of four blind or partly sighted individuals and four guides — planned a three-day backpacking trip in the Sierra foothills.

"There's a lot of conditioning — self-conditioning and social conditioning — that lets disabled people we're not supposed to be active," said Dan, who works part time for the Berkeley-based service organization for the disabled, the Center for Independent Living. "Going into the wilderness allows us to understand we can do things we never would have thought we could do."

It gives someone a whole lot more self-assurance and self-compassion."

Last time Dan had rafted the Stanislaus he had passed up the challenge at Jumping Rock. This time he jumped twice. Each time he had followed the sound of ETC guide Rick Spittler's ring tapping on the rocks, to rock to put his hands and feet to climb the almost-vertical wall up to the jumping point.

Spittler's voice became their eyes, when they needed eyes. They would know they were heading into a rapid as the river's music built toward crescendo. "Forward," Rick would yell, directing them how to paddle through the rapid. "Back paddle! Str-oo-oo-ka!" They knew they were to put their hands into the water and begin to stroke which Rick began the "Str-oo-oo-ka" and the stroke at the end of the word. That was the only way they could work together without chafe their paddles, one against the other.

Often Rick's voice would fill the long, quiet stretches on the lower half of the whitewater run from Camp Nine to Ferrer's Ferry. Then, their skin wet from the spray in the last rapid, the rafters would shove against the canyon breeze and wait for the sun to warm them. And listen to Rick tell stories. One about holding a queen-of-the-lake swimmer through a rapid, supported by his life preserver and steered away from rocks



Dan Smith, 25, gets ready to plunge, above; blind crew members, right, reach out to touch the ferns

by an ETC guide hanging on behind. There was a story about helping a tripe-snapper jump up a tree trunk until he could grab a rope swing with his one hand he had, grab hold, sail out over the water and splash. There was a story about taking a boatful of juvenile delinquents down the river and drowning to save the nude beach near the end of the run. "God, it's embarrassing," Rick said. "I've had kids doobey every paddle command I give and turn the boat around and boat straight for the beach."

And this story about the first time Rick captured a boat of blind folk down the river.

"We were coming into Sierra Club" — one of the best big rapids on the run. "I took the boat hit a hole and fell out. Nobody in the boat was sighted, and it took them a while before they realized I wasn't in the boat. Well, they knew they were coming into a rapid and they weren't hearing any direction from me, so eventually they must have figured it out. 'Hey, you guys, I don't think Rick is in the boat anymore.'"

"One of the blind guys was a real leadership type, and I guess he decided he should take over, because I'm floating down the river into the rapid and I'm hearing his voice booming out these commands. 'Right turn! Back paddle!' And he can't see where he's going any more than the rest of 'em."

"Of course, before they got through the rapid, every one of 'em was out of the boat. River doesn't know which a boat's full of blind folk; she doesn't care, she'll flip 'em anyway."

So here we've got six blind people floating down the river in their life jackets, love every minute of it, and I'm coming along behind trying to get 'em all pointed with their feet downstream so they'll bounce off the rocks with their feet instead of their heads. They musta seen a third of a mile before we finally got 'em all picked up in another boat."

And you just know Spittler loved every minute of it, too. "I love working out here," he said later, glancing over where the canyon wall rose with majestic wildness above the churning white water. "And I love showing it to other people. Especially people who thought they'd never see it or never experience it." "Last week I was out by myself climbing, and the whole time I was thinking, 'Is this place accessible to blind folk?' To quote: Could we get a wheelchair up here to this meadow?"

The more people have been told they can go into an area, the more I like taking them there."

ETC takes them skating in the winter time — cross-country and downhill — and rafting or backpacking in summer. Sometimes they take groups who want to venture no farther than the security of camping on ETC's 5 1/2

acres of land near Anahim Camp, sampling organically grown vegetables and learning to live, according to the ETC literature, "with minimum impact on the land."

Occasionally ETC takes groups down the Stanislaus River, but ETC "paddles" (usually) Rossi said it just isn't the same. The natural winds through privately owned land, developed land, instead of the Stanislaus natural rock formations and breathtaking canyon walls, there are roads and houses and people all along the way.

"What we want to give these people is a wilderness experience," Rossi said. "The American just isn't."

Running through the conversation of the blind folk and their guides was the realization that, for the blind anyway, this might be their last trip on the Stan.

The nine-mile white-water run empties into a quiet reservoir, the superwet point where water is held behind the recently completed New Melones Dam. The original intent of the dam builders, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, was to fill the dam halfway up the canyon, obliterating all the whitewater.

In time, predicted ETC guide Theresa Robbins, the dam will be filled as pressure mounts for the irrigation water, power and lakefront for crooked provide.

This was Debbie Norling's fourth trip on the Stan. She can visually perceive the



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difference between the ferns and, but not much else.

"This is a nice wilderness experience without being so strenuous you're exhausted," she said. She's studying Journalism and comparative literature at the University of California at Berkeley.

"We're just normal blind people who want to be outdoors and don't want to go jumping off any cliffs," Norling said of herself and the fourth member of the group, Sally Maguire of Berkeley.

Debbie and Sally declined Jumping Rock but, downstream at the rope swing, Debbie climbed out on the tree trunk shaking like a leaf, and swung out over the water.

"This is so scary," she said before she jumped. "But I'm sure I can do it."

Last winter Lopez, who lives in San Francisco, broke his ankle skiing when his sighted guide got from ETC told him to turn left instead of right and he plowed into a snowbank and fell still. He's anxious for the snow to fall so he can get on his skis again.

Since Lopez lost his sight completely — in the last two years — he has spent much of his time on outdoor expeditions with ETC and other groups. "I never had the time for it before," he said. "It was always working too hard."

Local groups offering outings

- Here is a list of Bay Area organizations that provide outdoor and wilderness experiences for disabled or innervely groups.
- Environmental Traveling Companions (ETC) San Francisco 474-7682
 - Berkeley Outreach Recreation Program (BORP) Berkeley 840-8682
 - Sierra Club's Inner City Outings San Francisco 664-3424
 - Blind Outdoor Leisure Development (BOLD) Davis (916) 758-7788
 - Environmental Volunteers Palo Alto 327-6017
 - Just Like Everybody Else Mountain View 950-2516
 - Access to Heritage Sausalito 332-2110
 - Recreation Center for Handicapped San Francisco 685-4100



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Feeling is believing

Rafting guide Rick Spittler loves showing off the rugged rapids of the Stanislaus River — particularly those who thought they'd never exper-

ience it. "Back paddle! Str-oo-oo-ka!" he yelled, and under his direction a crew of blind nature-lovers success-

fully navigated the rapids. On such a trip, the guides provide the expertise and unsentimental encouragement. The blind rafters provide the courage. See story, Page 4.