

Great Expectations

A Southern California nonprofit called Exceeding Expectations introduces inner city kids to triathlon. What happens next is nothing short of life changing.

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PHOTOS BY DAMIEN NOBLE ANDREWS

100 MILE CLUB



WAKERSHIM LOPEZ

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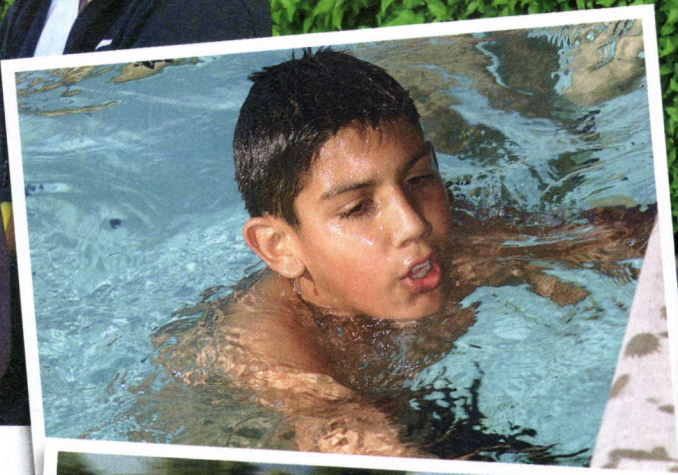
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Cherie Gruenfeld and Exceeding Expectations alum Nik.



Photos courtesy Cherie Gruenfeld

Nik is a bubbly, bright-eyed college sophomore. I first meet him at a coffee shop on campus at the University of California, San Diego on a breezy Friday morning to talk about Exceeding Expectations, a nonprofit organization of which he's a product. Nik greets me with a wide smile, revealing his braces—the last remaining traces of his adolescence. As we sit down to talk, he pulls out a spiral notebook.

"I've actually prepared some notes," he says. "One of the things Exceeding Expectations taught me was to always be prepared." There is nothing contrived about this casual endorsement of the program (abbreviated to EE); it's as organic and authentic as the pre-weekend buzz swirling around the campus coffeehouse. The fact is, EE didn't merely influence Nik's personality and life path—it reinvented him, turned him inside out until he didn't recognize himself.

"I was a rotten apple," says Nik, remembering his troubled boyhood. "I was always ditching school and got suspended like 10 times." Nik was in the fifth grade and living in San Bernardino with his younger brother and single mom when he first learned about Exceeding Expectations, a program that introduces kids to triathlon as a way of moving their lives in a positive direction. On a day like any other, Nik's teacher popped in a videotape of a woman racing in a triathlon. The woman was Cherie Gruenfeld, and the footage of her racing Ironman was part of a broader lesson about setting goals and the rewards of working hard to achieve them. Nik and his classmates were intrigued. He told his teacher he wanted to try doing a triathlon, and she put him in touch with Gruenfeld and her new Exceeding Expectations program.

"I like to think of how different my life would be if I hadn't gone to class that day," Nik says. "I know I wouldn't be where I am today."

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Ironman legend Cherie Gruenfeld

Planting the Seeds

It all started with an invitation. In 2001 Gruenfeld was asked by a close friend and teacher to speak to 200 sixth graders at an elementary school in Highland, Calif., about accomplishing goals—as experienced through the lens of triathlon racing. “They loved it and asked a lot of questions,” Gruenfeld recalls. When the teacher asked the kids who wanted to do a triathlon, all 200 hands shot up in the air. Gruenfeld had the interested kids come to a meeting where she spent some time getting to know them and selected 12 kids for the inaugural EE class.

A legend in the sport—Gruenfeld has competed in 22 Ironmans and won her age group in 14 (nine in Kona)—she reached out to the triathlon community for equipment donations, financial support and volunteers willing to help train and race with the kids. The goal wasn’t to groom the next generation of elite triathletes. The idea was

to give disadvantaged kids the opportunity to be a part of something positive—to expose them to an alternative environment absent the poverty, violence and vicious cycles of underachievement they had seen their entire lives. She wanted them to know how good it felt to realize a hard-fought goal. Triathlon was just the means to an end.

Their first race was the Redlands Triathlon. Gruenfeld recruited volunteers to form relay teams with the kids, who would do the bike leg. When she arrived at the kids’ homes to pick each of them up on their first training day several weeks before the race, she was stunned. “I thought I understood poverty, but I had never seen it from the inside,” Gruenfeld says. “That day I got inside where these kids live and it changed my life.” She hadn’t set out on a vision quest to help needy kids, but once she saw first-hand their circumstances, she knew there was no turning back.



Watching Them Grow

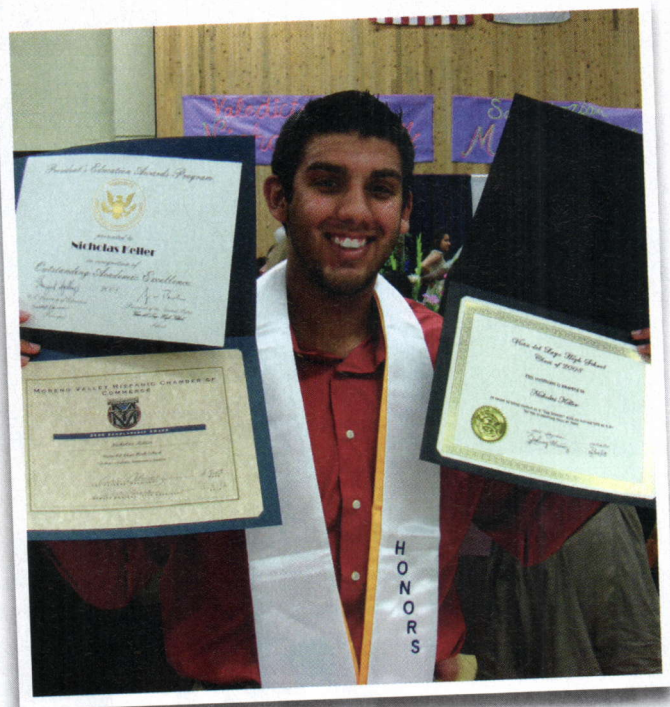
Established as a nonprofit in 2006, EE now includes some 45 members, ranging from grade-school kids to grown men who started in the program as boys (each child enjoys a lifetime membership). The first thing Gruenfeld notices after weeks spent working with the kids is improved attendance at school. Then they start getting better grades. “For the first time, these kids have someone expecting them to do well,” Gruenfeld says.

Just ask Nik, who is now working toward a biomedical engineering degree at UCSD. “Cherie grabbed me by the reins and showed me there was a different aspect to life,” he says. Early on, he wasn’t an eager pupil or athlete. He didn’t want to wake up early for races, and would become easily defeated if a race didn’t go his way. “She would tell me I was being a quitter,” he recalls. “I gradually found myself pushing my limits more and more.” He finished at the top of his age group at a 10K race and got to stand atop the podium. “Cherie asked me, ‘Now doesn’t that feel good?’” says Nik. “It did. A light bulb went on in my head.”

1,000 Words

On the wall of Gruenfeld’s home office, there’s a photo of her with one of her EE kids, Brandon. They’re in a pool, and he’s smiling as he clings to her shoulders while she moves through the water. The photo was taken at a small-town triathlon that features a pool swim as the finishing leg. Gruenfeld had told the kids they had to do the full triathlon, but that she would help get them through the swim and to the finish line. As each child entered the pool she was there to receive and carry them each on her back to the finish line. She did the swim leg with every single kid—all 12 of them.

To Gruenfeld, it just comes with the territory. Because when the odds are stacked in favor of sinking, there’s only one option: swim. ▀



Courtesy Cherie Gruenfeld

For more information or to make a charitable contribution, visit Eefoundation.org.