

The Ocean Asked Her to Choose

She Was Barely a Lifeguard. She Swam Out Anyway.

It was a hot day in December. Amber-Rose Berry and her mom, Karen Berry, were at Glencairn Beach, in Cape Town. She was 14, newly qualified as a lifeguard at Fish Hoek. *"I was barely a lifeguard; I hadn't even worked my first duty."*

The waves were big and there were no lifeguards on duty, but the beach was packed. As they left the water, they heard a commotion and discovered that a man had gone in and not been seen again.

An off-duty member of the National Sea Rescue Institute (NSRI), grabbed the torpedo rescue buoy, left on every beach for this purpose, and headed out. But he could make no headway through the waves and, defeated, he came back to shore.

Karen, a lifelong lifesaver, turned to her young teenage daughter: *"Go and do it,"* she said. *"You've got this. I believe in you. Swim."*

The irony of this story is that Amber-Rose was terrified of putting her face in the water as a toddler, yet has dedicated her life to the sea, and to saving others from drowning. And, she's about to make history – again.

At 16, she was the youngest person ever to swim the 33km across Cape Town's False Bay, between Miller's Point and Rooiels. Now 18, she is just weeks from her attempt at the English Channel, the world's most iconic open-water swim. While the distance is almost the same as False Bay, this is by far the more challenging swim, mainly due to strong currents and shipping.

Amber-Rose, from Pringle Bay, will represent South Africa in national Women's Month, celebrating the momentous women's march against the Pass Laws in 1956 – exactly 70 years ago. Her swim is dedicated to South African women: to all they have achieved and still can, and to her country as a whole.

Amber-Rose believes that pitting herself against terrifying odds will inspire other young people to set goals and fight for them. The slogan, Believe in What You Can Achieve, has been adopted by the fundraising campaign set up in her name, and tied to her swim.

The campaign will raise funds for the newly launched Ukukhula Institute in Makhanda. This advanced sports academy provides scholarships for disadvantaged student-athletes from Eastern Cape high schools to attend Rhodes University, the alma mater of her mother, Karen Berry.

400 Metres Through the Surf

But, on that December day, all of this was still a future dream, and all she was focused on was getting through those waves and making it to the drowning man. Her mom's words had spurred her on. *"Her being a life-long lifesaver makes our relationship very strong. We both have similar experiences and a shared passion for lifesaving."*

It was a tough swim, fighting a strong current through big waves, but Amber-Rose was fit and strong from training. *"I took the torpedo buoy and I swam about 400 metres out - which was far. But it's adrenaline, and in the heat of the moment you just swim. I'm very lucky that I have the physical ability to do that."*

She reached the point where onlookers reported having seen the man and she found him, partially submerged. *"Luckily, a surfer paddled over and helped me, because I was a little 14-year-old. I mean, I'm not a massive person, and this was a full-grown man, and a very large man."*

The surfer helped her flip him over and lay him across her chest with the buoy - she knew all this in theory, from her training – and struck out for shore on her back. Kicking hard, she pulled him slowly back towards the beach.

In the meantime, someone had called emergency services and the NSRI rubber duck met them in the wave-zone before they reached shore. He was pulled into the boat and CPR attempted but, unfortunately, it was unsuccessful. He was pronounced dead.

"I felt like a fraud"

Amber-Rose received four acknowledgments of her bravery, the first from her school, and three national awards. She was awarded an I&J Heroes Award, in a ceremony at the Two Oceans Aquarium, and national bravery awards from Girl Guides South Africa and Lifesaving South Africa.

But all that meant nothing to her. *"I felt like a fraud. The fact that he died took me a long time to come to terms with – that I couldn't do anything. It was really, really traumatic. And it was very hard to accept. And I felt a bit pathetic. After all that, I didn't save the guy."*

In the four intervening years, she has come to terms with it. *"I can see that the closure it would have brought to the family is incomparable to the alternative. And more than anything, I'm sure it was important to them knowing that somebody tried to help."*

Amber-Rose will need more than physical strength for the Channel swim. She'll need to draw on this same bravery to provide the inner strength and resilience to become the youngest South African to complete the swim.