

NEWS UPDATE

Channel swimmer tackles Alcatraz

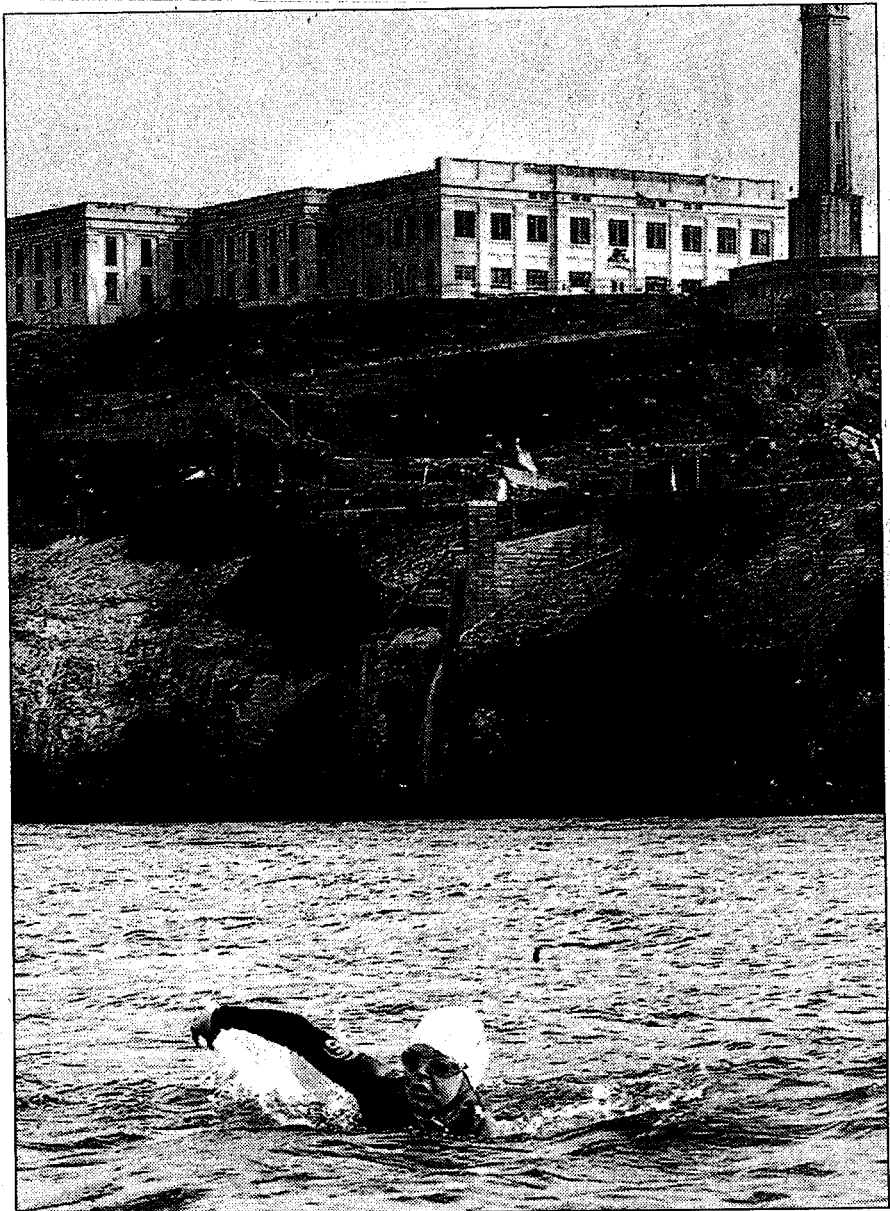
Background: As part of a relay team in July 2001, Karen Gaffney of Southwest Portland became the first athlete with Down syndrome, a chromosomal birth defect, to swim the English Channel. During the 2002 Olympic Torch Relay, she carried the torch through Portland and helped light the caldron in Pioneer Courthouse Square.

Update: On Sunday, Gaffney will be among more than 1,000 wetsuit-clad swimmers to plunge into 55-degree water for the 1.5-mile swim portion of the Accenture Escape From Alcatraz Triathlon in San Francisco. The swim from the infamous midbay rock to the beach near the Marina Green will be Gaffney's most ambitious open-water event since the Channel relay.

At 4 feet 10 and less than 95 pounds, 28-year-old Gaffney trains two to three miles daily at Multnomah Athletic Club. The routine keeps her fit for a busy life of nationwide public speaking and working as president of the nonprofit Karen Gaffney Foundation.

The foundation's recent work includes starting Friends First clubs at Portland-area high schools, encouraging students with disabilities and those without to form friendships, work on projects and spark discussions about diversity and ability.

The foundation also raises money to hold Everyday Courage theatrical workshops for high school students. And this fall, it plans to coordinate classes to teach Oregonians with disabilities the value of regular exercise.



COLIN GIFT/SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

Portlander Karen Gaffney practices swimming from Alcatraz to San Francisco in preparation for Sunday's Accenture Escape From Alcatraz Triathlon.

About a year ago, Gaffney was speaking to Phil Summers's students in the Tigard-Tualatin School District's ABLE program. Summers, an avid triathlete, said one thought ran through his mind: the Alcatraz triathlon, which he'd done twice.

He enlisted his friend, Mark Kendall of SpeedShot Racing and Coaching Services in Portland, and formed a relay team. Gaffney will swim, Summers will cycle the

18-mile bike leg and Kendall will run the final eight miles.

Summers said, "I knew... with Karen on the swim, and the way she touches people, we could raise awareness for both her cause and the sport of triathlon. It seemed to be a perfect match."

— Katy Muldoon

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