

## Outdoor Role Models: Where Is Generation Next?

What could a former San Diego gang-banger and an 11-year-old girl raised in the shadow of Whistler Mountain possibly have in common? Plenty, as it turns out, particularly if both are part of the continually evolving outdoor marketplace. In fact, Outdoor Industry Foundation feels Juan Herrera and Kerry-Anne Hamilton—the odd couple in question—are uniquely positioned to lead the next generation of industry role models. Both are part of OIF's inaugural class of Outdoor Idols ([www.outdooridols.org](http://www.outdooridols.org)). Joining them are Logan Binggeli, Emily Harrington, Rush Sturges, James Bonnett, Travis Macy and Emily Jackson.

OIF, a non-profit arm established by Outdoor Industry Association, launched Outdoor Idols to help boost the industry as a whole. The goal is to raise the profile of young outdoor athletes who exemplify the ethos of the industry. In turn, they can serve as trendsetters and role models for the next generation of outdoor enthusiasts. OIA plans to name new Outdoor Idols every year, utilizing them as ambassadors in a variety of outreach programs. A panel of 20 journalists, ath-

letes, industry leaders and Outdoor Idols alumni will choose winners annually.

"From LeBron James and Dwyane Wade to Tony Hawk and Kelly Slater, every other industry has heroes—role models that inspire youth," says Ali Steimke, OIF's program manager and part of the brain trust that conceived Outdoor Idols. "By promoting heroes in our industry, whether they are climbers or paddlers or mountaineers, we have an opportunity to share the benefits of the active outdoor lifestyle with the youth generation."

Steimke gets no argument from Marla Streb, one of the outdoor industry's most respected athletes. Introduced to competitive mountain biking at the late age

of 28, Streb turned pro in 1993, and quickly became a champion—both in her sport and in business.

"The outdoor industry needs role models for kids just like all the other sports," she says. "Now that our sports are becoming more legitimate, people are respectful and don't shun us as 'just those extreme athletes.'"

Timmy O'Neill agrees. An outdoor industry veteran, he has used his status as a world-class climber to promote his sport, his career and healthy lifestyles. O'Neill, who learned his love of the outdoors from his family as a kid, fully realizes his responsibility as a role model.

"Role models are important to the intellectual, physical and social well being of every child," says O'Neill. "The early guidance I received to explore the wild places outside of my immediate sur-

roundings—and more importantly my comfort zone—provided a solid base for me from which to interact with others and to understand our connectedness to the planet."

Herrera, for one, is very familiar with the value of a role model. Though he grew up just a stone's throw from Southern California's beaches and mountains, the great outdoors seemed a world away as a child. Abused by a foster family, he ran away at age 14, and took to the mean streets of San Diego.

"I come from a background in which many have already given up or are not alive," Herrera says. "I was involved with gangs, and had many problems with fighting and violence."

But Herrera found sanctuary at the Toussaint Teen Center in San Diego. There he met Chris Rutgers, the Executive Director of Outdoor Outreach, a California non-profit organization focused on helping at-risk youth by immersing them in the outdoors. For Herrera, gaining a positive role model transformed his life.

"Role models are at the top of my list," he says. "They can be negative like a fellow gang member or an alcoholic parent. Or they can be positive, and turn your



Kerry-Anne Hamilton (right) with coach Vanessa Stark

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whole life around."

Herrera now works for Outdoor Outreach as a Trip Leader and Instructor. He has also developed into an accomplished mountain biker, rock climber, kayaker and snowboarder. Surfing is next on his list. "This has become my world," says Herrera. "I have something I really care about."

Unlike Herrera, Hamilton didn't have to look far for her role model. "It's my dad, for sure," she says. "If he tries something, he gives it his all and won't give up—something I hope to do in everything that I try."

No doubt that Hamilton, who has been mountain biking and downhill skiing for as long as she can remember, takes after her father, Craig. The Canadian native is already recognized as a star in both sports—even though the vast majority of her competition is boys. "It's fine being the only girl," she says. "You just have to tell yourself you're as good as the boys and try to beat them. They are kinda funny when you do."

For both Herrera and Hamilton, getting used to life as a role model is an adjustment. According to Steimke, they can learn a lot from the likes of O'Neill and Streb. "Both are ambassadors for the

active outdoor lifestyle," she says.

O'Neill, for example, partners with leading amputee and spinal-injury athletes on various climbs. He recently made a seven-day ascent up a dangerous route on the 3,000-foot El Capitan with his brother, Sean, who is paralyzed from the waist down. "Seeing my friends overcome their disabilities and achieve the seemingly impossible feeds my soul and forces me to reach even further," he says.

Streb, meanwhile, acknowledges the business of being a role model. "I would say I've pushed my sport on the marketing side," she says. "I've been successful by being versatile in the types of racing I do, self-promoting in creative ways, and then finally winning on occasion.

Heck, I've even had a bobblehead doll."

But Streb is quick to point out there's more to being a role model than generating cash flow. "We dedicate our lives to training and competing," she says. "We are very healthy and work toward goals. The same lessons are learned in our sports as the mainstream sports. Outdoor heroes are absolutely necessary for the growth of outdoor recreation."

O'Neill echoes these thoughts. "Emblazoning a face on a product pales in comparison to having that face in front of an assembly of children," he says. "Leading by example is crucial, saying to kids, 'This is what I do and this is what it provides me.'"

According to Steimke, with up-and-comers like Hamilton and Herrera fol-

lowing in the footsteps of O'Neill and Streb, the outdoor industry is in good hands. "All of our Outdoor Idols are special," she says. "We'll work with them to help promote their activities and appearances, raise their visibility inside and outside of the industry, connect them with local youth groups, and facilitate youth outreach activities that want to participate in."

Despite her young age, Hamilton seems to get it. "I'm just me," she says. "But, yeah, if I can help persuade people to get off the couch, walk away from the computer, or stop smoking to take up a cool sport that is both good for them and tons of fun, then that would be great."

Herrera also recognizes the impact he can have on others. "Many kids I work with don't believe that I once was in their shoes—being on the streets, getting caught up in gang activities and going through the system for homeless teens," he says. "Now I have risen above the influence of the streets."

"I may not be a professional athlete," Herrera adds, "but I do know that if I did not have this opportunity, I'd probably be six feet under by now."

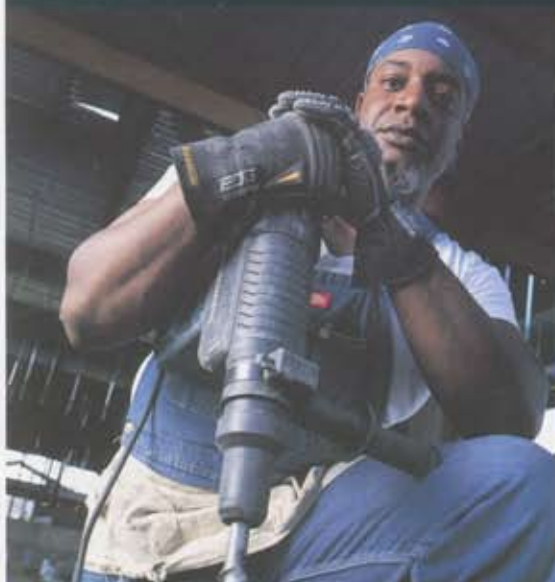
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