

Amy Purdy: Life After (Near) Death

By: Sandy Muller

Amy Purdy is an adaptive athlete, spokeswoman, actor, model, and co-founder of Adaptive Action Sports, a non-profit organization that helps athletes with disabilities get involved in extreme sports. I met up with her at the Extremity Games, where she was competing in the wakeboarding event. She looked healthy, confident, and much prettier than anyone has a right to look just coming from the lake. It was hard to believe that not that many years ago she was rushed to the hospital in a state of septic shock. She was 19 years old at the time. She was dying. And she knew it.

In 1999, Amy was experiencing flu-like symptoms for about 24 hours when her body suddenly started to shut down. She had respiratory and organ failure, hemorrhaging of her lungs and adrenal glands, and loss of circulation. Though she didn't know it at the time, Amy had Bacterial Meningitis and a blood condition called disseminated intravascular coagulation (DIC). What she did know, as she was being rushed to the hospital, was that she was in serious trouble. She recalled thinking: "This is what it feels like to die." By then she was in survival mode so the thought didn't scare her. Instead, she had a sense of detachment. She was aware of what was happening, but there was no emotion attached to it.

Amy's system was so out of whack that her condition changed every few hours and her body was in a constant state of crisis. The doctors gave her a two percent chance of living. At one point, her stomach became distended and hard. The doctors suspected she had internal bleeding and wanted a CT Scan to diagnose where the bleeding was coming from. Getting the scan was no easy feat, however. It took eight doctors and nurses a whole day to move Amy from her bed to a gurney. Every time they attempted to move her, the machines she was hooked to would go off in mass panic. When they were finally able to do the CT scan, the doctors discovered that her spleen was ten times its normal size and they performed emergency surgery to remove it.

Amy remembers the surgery. Again, there was no emotion or pain attached to the memory. After all, she was in a coma at the time. Yet she remembers them cutting into her stomach. She remembers them using the electric paddles to re-start her heart. She remembers the doctors' and nurses' faces. Most of all, she remembers the sense of being pulled away and thinking "this is it."

Then, as Amy explains it, "I was given a choice. I could stay or I could go. I thought of all the good things in my life and decided that whatever was wrong with me, I would stay and make of my life what I could. Immediately after I made the decision, I was filled with a warm feeling." Three weeks later when Amy woke up from her coma and was able to communicate via writing, she wrote a reminder to herself. "You made the choice to be here." She didn't want to ever forget that she had been given the choice.

While Amy was in the hospital she received 32 blood transfusions and, because of the blood disorder that caused lack of circulation to her legs, the doctors had to amputate both her legs below the knee. She vomited fifteen times a day for a year and when she was released from the hospital she was 83 pounds. Two years after being released, she had a Kidney Transplant, receiving a kidney from her father.

Yet Amy felt that, because she was given a choice, she couldn't really complain about the situation she was in. To this day, she does not regret that choice.

When asked what advice she would give to others experiencing similar trauma, Amy encourages them to "remember that everything is temporary and believe that things will get better. Remind yourself every day that you are getting stronger and healthier, even if it doesn't feel like it. Positive thinking will pull you through. You just have to keep moving forward."

And move forward she did. When she was feeling better, one of the first things Amy wanted to do was get back to snowboarding. "My doctor kept notating in my chart 'patient keeps asking to go snowboarding', but he wouldn't let me go." When her doctor finally did give her the go-ahead, Amy researched other amputee snowboarders to find out what kind of prosthetic legs they used, but she couldn't find any information on the subject. She discovered there were amputee skiers but no amputee snowboarders.

Never one to give up, Amy worked with her prosthetist to come up with some snowboarding legs herself. It took constant adjustments and trial and error on the slopes, but eventually they came up with something that would work. Amy started to compete again in various snowboarding events including the USASA National Snowboarding Competition where she won three medals

But Amy didn't stop there. Remembering how difficult it was for her to find information about adaptive snowboarding and wanting to help make snowboarding and all action sports available to other permanently disabled individuals, Amy (along with her able-bodied snowboard partner and now-boyfriend Daniel Gale) co-founded [Adaptive Action Sports](#) in 2005. Today, three years later, AAS organizes various snowboard, skateboard and wakeboard camps, clinics and events for individuals living with permanent physical disabilities. The non-profit organization sponsored two adaptive standup snowboarders for a halfpipe and slopestyle exhibition in the ESPN Winter X Games, and developed the first adaptive Motocross race and skate board exhibition in the ESPN 2008 Summer X Games. They also developed and organized the first Adaptive Snowboarding World Championships.

Co-founding AAS is just one of Amy's many accomplishments since she was given a two percent chance of living. She has also modeled, acted, been in a Madonna video, had her story featured in various TV programs and magazines, and become a spokesperson for the National Meningitis Association. Part of her role as the NMA's spokesperson is to promote the Meningococcal Meningitis vaccination to parents, high schools and colleges. Amy has done over 40 television interviews promoting the vaccine. She also has spoken to some of the parents of children who died from Meningitis. "Many children die quickly of Meningitis," Amy says, "and the parents are not able to make it to their bedside in time. I tell them about my experience and what it felt like for me to know I was going and how the emotions are no longer attached at that point. Though the children might be aware that their parents aren't there, they are in survival mode and the awareness has no emotion attached to it." She believes that the children are not traumatized by the fact that the parents aren't there and hopes that her words bring comfort to a parent who agonizes over it.

Like so many people with disabilities that I've spoken to, Amy is able to come up with a list of good things that has come out of her life-threatening situation: her greater sense of adventure, her ability to live in the moment, her discovery of such a wonderful, supportive community that she never knew existed. Despite her difficulties, or perhaps because of them, Amy appreciates every moment she has.

As we sit in chairs by the lake at the Extremity Games, I watch as she casually switches out her prosthetics in front of me. I know her back hurts from taking the brunt of the pressure wakeboarding because her prosthetics don't bend easily. I know her greatest challenge is not her disability but the possibility of having kidney failure. I think about all that she's been through and continues to face. And, as she tells me how lucky she feels to be given a second chance, I am amazed once again at the resiliency of the human spirit.

But it is Amy's answer to my last question that affects me most. When asked if she ever thinks that what happened to her was pre-destined and happened so she could accomplish all that she has, Amy takes a moment to respond. It is obviously not the first time she's considered the question. "I used to think that everything happens for a reason," she reflects thoughtfully. "Now, I think what happened just happened. And what's happened since then is because of the way I reacted to it." It is an answer that still lingers with me today.