

PROGRESS

CAREER BUILDING

Leigh Fitzpatrick on making it in the male-dominated world of construction

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TURNING THE TIDE

FOR BETH FRENCH, SWIMMING THE CHANNEL WAS JUST ANOTHER CHALLENGE. IT'S HARD TO IMAGINE THAT SHE WAS IN A WHEELCHAIR AT 17, SAYS **OLIVER STALLWOOD...**



To the extreme: Beth sought out bigger and bolder challenges after beating illness

AS A teenager, Beth French was told she was lazy. By the age of 17, she was in a wheelchair. The open-water swimmer, who recently attempted to swim across seven of the world's most dangerous sea channels in just one year, was diagnosed with probable glandular fever at ten-years-old and, after years of debilitating fatigue, was found to have ME (myalgic encephalomyelitis) at the age of 17.

'I was left without diagnosis until I had a complete meltdown at the age of 17,' she explains. 'I woke up one morning unable to support myself on my legs. I screamed at them in my head, but there just wasn't the strength.'

Beth remained bedridden and wheelchair-bound for months. Her mother changed doctors several times until one investigated her situation more thoroughly and, after several tests, diagnosed ME. It took four years for Beth to fully recover and she drew up a bucket list of things to achieve when fit again. At 21, Beth moved to Hawaii and began ocean swimming.

Over the next few years, she worked her way through the list: she swam with wild dolphins, walked on lava, climbed a mountain, built her own house, lived as a Buddhist nun in Thailand and had a baby.

'There was only one thing left - to swim the English Channel,' says the 41-year-old from Milverton in Somerset. Working as a self-employed massage therapist, Beth home-schooled her son Dylan, who had been diagnosed with autism, while swimming in the evenings along the East Devon coast towards Lyme Regis. To build up the strength, she would also tow Dylan in a dinghy behind her.

In 2012, Beth swam the English Channel and in 2014 she became the

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'I cherish my body where once I felt trapped in it'

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first person to swim from Cornwall to the Isles of Scilly, despite repeatedly being stung by jellyfish, suffering spasms and wearing nothing thicker than a bathing suit during a 17-and-a-half hour swim across 26 miles - the equivalent of the London Marathon.

Her next project was to be something much bigger: to complete an extreme challenge called Oceans Seven in one year. The marathon swim includes crossing the North Channel between Northern Ireland and Scotland, the Cook Strait in New Zealand, the Moloka'i Channel in Hawaii, the English Channel, the Catalina Channel in California, the Tsugaru Strait in Japan and the Strait of Gibraltar.

'It was a sheer privilege to be in the position to attempt the swims,' she explains. 'And learning about myself while I swim is what I do it for. I have had time to redefine myself in my own terms. I am my own hero, my own advocate and my own best friend. I now cherish my body where once I felt trapped in it.'

Beth began the Oceans Seven challenge in 2016 and her progress was captured in a documentary called *Against The Tides*, released in cinemas



In her element: While training, Beth would sometimes tow son Dylan, right

this month. You will have to watch the film to find out whether she made it or not, but Beth has now turned her focus on to swimming coaching, her inspirational speaking and helping her son negotiate the choppy waters of adolescence.

While she still suffers from ME symptoms, Beth says the most important thing is living life to the full. 'I manage my ME but I don't feel like I suffer like I used to. Obviously, it is not as severe as it once was but

when I feel flat and ready to collapse, I celebrate listening to my body. For other people chasing dreams or hoping to redefine themselves, I'd say share your dreams.

'The more you practise making dreams happen, the easier it gets. The more you put it off, the harder it feels to start. Play. Life is an adventure.'

■ For more information about Beth's Oceans Sevens challenge and the film, visit againstthetidesfilm.com

Going up: Leigh gets a sense of achievement from seeing projects brought to life





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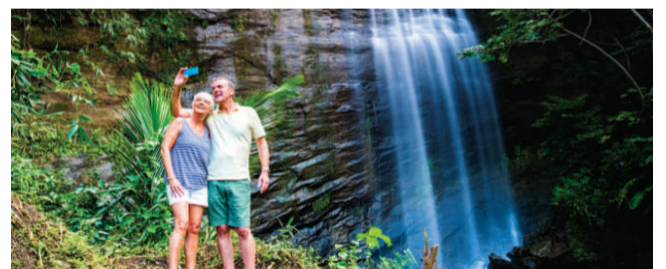
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