

# A Journey Of Discovery

## An Interview with Diana Nyad

**EDITORS' NOTE** On September 2, 2013, at the age of 64, Diana Nyad became the first person to swim from Cuba to Florida without the aid of a shark cage, swimming 110.86 miles in 53 hours from Havana to Key West. In the 1970s, she became known as one of the world's greatest long-distance swimmers with her open-water achievements, including a record-breaking swim around Manhattan. For the next 30 years, Nyad was a prominent sports broadcaster and journalist, filing compelling stories for National Public



Diana Nyad

Radio, ABC's Wide World of Sports, and others. She is the author of the bestselling memoir, *Find a Way*, and three other books; is a national fitness icon; a talented linguist; the co-founder of EverWalk; and one of today's most powerful and engaging public speakers. She performed her Off-Broadway show, *The Swimmer*, at the Minetta Lane Theatre in New York City in 2019.

### Where did you develop your passion for swimming?

I think the deeper question is that if I am a person with discipline and passion – it really

doesn't matter if it is swimming or something else. I have always had the discipline and passion to fulfill my dreams.

Most people gravitate to the things they are good at, and for me it was swimming. I was growing up in Fort Lauderdale in South Florida where there was a swimming culture, and the Swimming Hall of Fame is located there. I had a feel for the water and was fast in the water, but I think more than anything I had a personality trait of loving a long-term goal and going after it fully, never taking a day off. I enjoyed the feel of moving through the water, but more than anything I enjoyed the discipline it takes to be successful.

### What led to your dream to make the swim from Cuba to Florida?

That dream started very young. I was nine years old when the Cuban Revolution broke out, and all of us living in South Florida knew Cuba very well. My parents had gone to Cuba many times to spend the weekend and dance salsa at the Hotel Nacional which was the playground of John F. Kennedy and his wife, Jackie, as well as Frank Sinatra and the Rat Pack. We all

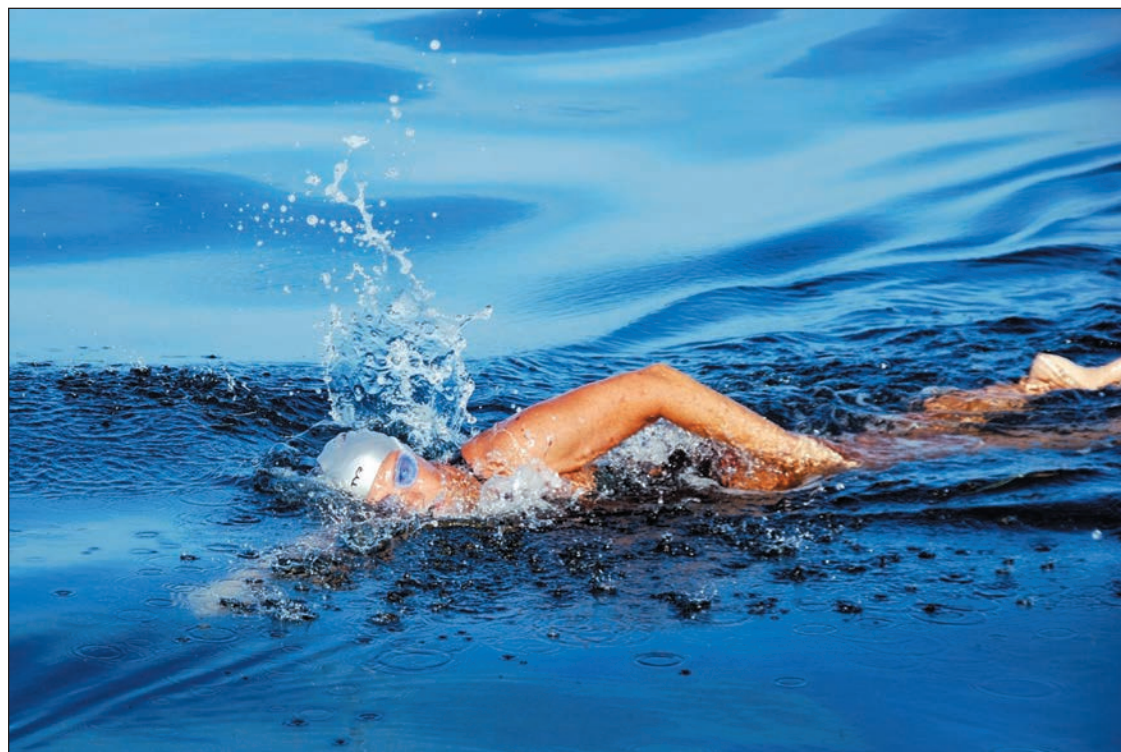
knew Cuba, and then in one day – literally in 24 hours – that beautiful island right off the coast became forbidden.

At age nine, I was already a champion swimmer for my age group. I was standing on the beach in Fort Lauderdale one day with my mother and I asked her why I could not see Cuba from the beach. She said that it was just over the curvature of the Earth and told me that it was so close that I, the little champion swimmer, could actually swim there. Those words, at the age of nine as a little swimmer, stayed in the back of my imagination. Later in my life, in my 20s when I became a national open water swimming champion and held a number of world records, it was always that phrase from my mother about swimming to Cuba that was in my mind. I started researching it and preparing for the attempt.

### What led you to continue to try five times to accomplish this feat?

My team and I were believers. My team felt that this was an exciting journey of discovery – discovery about ourselves, discovery about working together, discovery about science and the ocean. When we did not make it, we came back, put our brains together, researched better,

**“My team felt that this was an exciting journey of discovery – discovery about ourselves, discovery about working together, discovery about science and the ocean.”**



Diana Nyad during her epic swim

and came back loaded with better knowledge and better prepared for the next try. This is why I believe that in the end our team was the one that finally made it across – we refused to give up and we loved being on the journey, even during the times that we did not reach the destination.

**You mention the team. While swimming can be thought of as an individual sport, how critical was the team in achieving your goal?**

I would have never stumbled up on that U.S. shore without my team, and I think if you talk to any open ocean endurance swimmer, the second they reach the sand, they are going to turn around and thank the team since they deserve equal credit for making it across. It is true that the athlete is putting in the majority of the drudgery of all the hours of the work, but without Bonnie Stoll, the head of the expedition and my head handler; the shark diver experts who are brave individuals and were willing to put their lives ahead of mine and go under me at night in the pitch black since we did not use any lights as they attract jellyfish and sharks; Dr. Angel Yanagihara, the world's leading box jellyfish expert; the medical team of University of Miami doctors; John Bartlett, my navigator, who is a mathematical genius and plotted the course – I could not have made it. This well-versed, committed, and talented team was essential for me to make it across the body of water.

**What was the feeling when you reached shore and felt the sand beneath your feet?**

When we were two hours from shore and we could see palm trees and helicopters were flying above for news service, I tread water and I talked to my 40-person team. I told them that while I was going to walk out on that beach pretty soon and have my picture taken, not to ever forget that we did this together. When I stumbled up on that beach, I was flashing back on all

the days that I decided to do a 14 hour training swim in the Caribbean, and if I came into the dock at 13 hours and 58 minutes, Bonnie knew that I did not want to make any concessions and that I needed to swim back out for a minute and then swim back in to make it a true 14 hours. So, when I stumbled up on that beach, that is what I was proud of – that our team refused to give up, we refused to give in. We never made a concession of even two minutes as we were getting ready, and that is why we made it across.

**What interested you in writing the book, *Find a Way*, and what are the key messages you wanted to convey in the book?**

I had finally achieved the holy grail of my career – it was history, and it was epic. I had been trying it for 35 years, and it was time to write a life story. I like to think it is a deeply layered story, but in the end, the basic tenet in the book is that I learned early that you do not get to live any day over again. If you have made a mistake, if you have not given it everything you could, if you have not embraced the day – you wasted it. You better grab every day of your precious life and live it the biggest and the best you can live it. Go to sleep every night with no regrets, and you will make it to the end. And when you take that last breath to go to sleep for the final time, you will have no regrets. This is at the heart and soul of the book.

**What did you feel about the making of the movie, *Nyad*, and did it effectively capture the essence of your journey?**

I think it captured the essence of the journey. Annette Bening knew me very well before we went to shoot the movie, and she wasn't entirely my personality. She knew that and was asked to play a script that had an unapologetic, fierce, leading character, and that is the way Annette played it. She was not what I would call as "likeable" as I am in real life, and she would be the first

one to admit that, but that is what the script called for, and what the producers and directors wanted.

Any life story that gets taken to Hollywood and on the big screen can't be a replicated documentary of that person's life, but what it did capture was the perseverance and resilience of a person who will not take no for an answer, and will try again and again. The movie also captured the 44-year friendship that Bonnie and I had in a very effective way. I am very proud of the movie, and it is not often you get to have a movie named after you which is pretty lucky.

**What led you and Bonnie to create the nonprofit, EverWalk, and how do you define its mission?**

When we finished the swim in 2013, Bonnie and I were filled with the awe of this blue planet. We spent hundreds of hours out on that ocean in the Caribbean and Mexico and off Florida, and we fell in love across this surface. We wanted to try to give people the sense of discovering who you are when you spend long hours with the simplicity of your body movement, along with the training that makes you so strong, and the rhythm of taking stroke after stroke. We knew we couldn't take large numbers of people out into the ocean to give them that experience, but we could walk under the blue sky and have those same feelings of traveling across the curvature of the Earth and being who we want to be, feeling the rhythm of our feet on the pavement.

We started our nonprofit, called EverWalk, to build community, walking side by side, leaving our differences behind.

**What advice do you give to young people about pursuing their dreams?**

I tell young people to choose a direction – it may not be where you end up, but you will meet someone on that course that inspires you to your next opportunity. Action will take you to your big life's dream. ●



*The moment of triumph in Key West, Florida*

**“You better grab every day of your precious life and live it the biggest and the best you can live it.”**