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This story is about an adventure inspired by my young, four-year passion for NHSA swimming. This Key West journey shared with five other NHSA swimmers exemplifies the qualities fostered and encouraged by the NHSA and illustrates what swimming in the NHSA has meant to me. Our swim required ultimate team work, deep, mutual respect, trust, extraordinary endurance, adaptability when facing new or unexpected challenges, discipline, organization and, most importantly, a profound sense of humor. Only because of the friendships formed and personal qualities achieved as a NHSA swimmer, was I able to successfully lead this race around the Key...

The sun did not shine.
It was too cold to play.
So I sat in the house
On that cold, cold, snow day.

I sat with Mama,
We sat there, we two
As I checked in my e-mail,
For something to do.

I have always admired the Cat in the Hat. He is inventive and resourceful and knows how to spontaneously throw together a plan involving curious skills, a bit of chaos and the help of good friends. On a cold snowy day and in this spirit, I opened my e-mail announcing a twelve-and-a-half mile, open-water swim around Key West. Nothing sounded more enticing as I listened to the wind howl.

I forwarded the e-mail to every NHSA swimmer and coach that I knew. Surely there were a few who would find this exciting. I promoted my idea to anyone who would listen and watched enthusiasm take hold at last year's NHSA State Swimming Championships. Interest ebbed and flowed for a few months, but I rounded up five swimmers eager to join me. All were novice long-distance racers, and none had open-water swimming experience. Despite these "setbacks," we were determined to enter the race as a relay, each racing for at least two miles.

While traveling to Key West, we decided that our goal was to finish all twelve and a half miles of this grueling swim. We decided to wear hot-pink swim caps so that our support team could easily spot us in the water. We were informed by a veteran swimmer to coat-up with zinc oxide to avoid sunburn, as our skin was the typical pasty pale shade of New Hampshire snow-bird.

On race day, equipped with Cliff Bars and Propel, we were ready. We attended the carb-loading meeting the night before and heard about some of the exciting things that we might encounter during the race. We would swim over the ghostly masts of sunken ships, around a whirlpool, between the sharp rusty spikes of a deserted ship mooring field, with sharks and barracuda, and through a cruise ship channel. They forgot to mention that the depth of the water would vary from more than one hundred feet to twelve inches and that we would be swimming past the Key West Fishing Club, which was holding a fishing contest in which club members were

chumming for large grouper and tarpon! The worst realization was that our oldest and most experienced swimmer, Coach Chris, decided to spend the day in a flame-patterned Speedo, matching sarong and floppy straw hat.

The horn sounded, and the race began. Erica, the first swimmer, had not swum since NHSA Champs. Nevertheless, she swam like a champion. Coach Chris swam next, safe from the big fish that would surely steer clear of that Speedo! While swimming, each witnessed the ocean's treasures. Meg swam in synchronicity with graceful dolphins, I came nose to nose with a sea turtle, and T.J. received encouragement from a school of tropical fish. Even Jenny, who began her turn with a fearful "I hate the sea," managed to overcome her worries and enjoy the sighting of an endangered spotted eagle ray. Mile after mile, we started to pass other swimmers. Sharing their strain and feeling a bit guilty for passing, we cheered them on. Six miles into the race, our boat captain told us that there were no swimmers ahead; that we were in first place. Flabbergasted that our rag-tag team of snow-birds could swim past trained teams from Texas and Florida, our enthusiasm soared, and our arm speed increased.

Sun-burned, dehydrated, and salty after four hours, fifty minutes and forty-eight seconds, our six-person relay crossed the finish line, winning first place in our division. We all jumped off our support boat to swim the last half-mile together. We had exceeded all of our expectations and we had a lot of fun while completing our unique experience.

And now a year later
As the snow falls anew,
We dream of Key West
I know just what to do!

Assemble the swimmers
For this year's race round the Key
Should I swim it alone?
No! A relay it will be!

Again we'll be challenged
Through water and sand
Sea creatures will enchant us
As we race round the land.

But the true fun we'll have
As we race as a team
Will remain in our hearts
And live on in our dreams.