

SERVICE ENTRANCE

Jon Rose trades waves for water

BY CHRIS DIXON

At 5:15 p.m. on September 9, 2009, Jon Rose bobbed atop a surfboard at Lance's Left in the Mentawai Islands. The 31-year-old Laguna Beach pro surfer was getting in an evening session with his best friend Jordan Tappis, a Los Angeles record executive. The next day they planned to continue on to Padang, and then Bali, for more surf.

They had also lined up a side trip to a Balinese village where Rose would launch a pilot project whose working title was "Waves for Water." At the urging of Jon's father, Jack, a California-based carpenter who had recently been building rainwater catchment systems in Africa, Jon had stuffed ten grapefruit-sized, gravity-fed ceramic water filters into a backpack. Affixed to a standard five-gallon bucket, a single filter could transform the most fetid, coliform-ridden runoff into clear, odorless drinking water—enough for 100 people, for five years.

Rose had literally spent the last of his money on this trip. His professional surfing career was in decline. His Laguna home was entering foreclosure. The company he worked for was facing bankruptcy. His marriage was falling apart.

But Balinese swell lay on the horizon and this project offered a new opportunity: search for waves, do and document a little good in the Third World, and thus have an excuse to search for more waves. Still, Rose could not have anticipated how immediately, and forcefully, this transition would occur.

At 5:16 p.m. a subduction zone beneath the Indian Ocean unleashed a 7.6-magnitude earthquake. Rose's surfboard vibrated like a bass drum, while Padang, a city of 650,000 was cast into terrifying ruin. A scene of smoky devastation greeted the crew of the *Freedom Three* the following morning. "There was no debate, no discussion in my mind," says Rose. "I was going in. That one decision altered the course of my life."

Waves for Water establishes relationships with local communities on initial visits rather than building top-heavy programs. Of his first trip to Liberia in September of 2011, Rose says, "All you need is for one mother to give clean water to her baby for the first time in its life and you've got your advocate right there."



DJ STRUNZ



After a year and a half working in Haiti following the 2010 earthquake, Rose flew to the Mentawai Islands for a boat trip, only to cross paths with the second tsunami in his time traveling Indonesia. "People said, 'Okay, I'm not traveling with you anymore,'" he jokes. With 100 filters packed, the surf trip quickly turned into a relief mission. "We had access to all of these places a day or two after the tsunami."

Rose had a deckhand run him to the beach aboard the yacht's dinghy, where he flagged down a local kid with a moped. They sped past twisted rebar, crushed bone, and bloodcurdling screams in search of a relief station.

On finding a medical outpost, Rose was surprised to find that what the Indonesian Red Cross needed most was clean water—not so much for drinking, but cleaning wounds. A scum-filled concrete storm basin lay behind the relief center. On the roadside lay several used gasoline jugs. Rose poked a hole in the base of a jug and rigged up a filter. Workers marveled as he slammed a full cup.

Back home in California, TV stations reported that Rose had died. "A crew came to interview my dad," he says. "I called home five minutes before the broadcast,

but it went out anyway. I told everyone I was going to stay in Padang."

It would be only a couple of days later that the group managed to line up a flight out of Indonesia, but the time amid the chaos had an immense effect on Rose. He was, however, uncharacteristically quiet about it. All he had really told Tappis, or anyone, about what he'd seen on the ground was that "it was gnarly." But Rose was quietly obsessing over how to get back down to Padang with more filters.

"He was just blown away by the devastation and the heartbreak," Tappis says. "Before all this, Jon had no real aspirations of being a humanitarian. There were just ten filters and a backpack. But that's where the building blocks began: an organization for surfers, by surfers."

To friends who knew him prior to September 9, he was still the Jon Rose familiar to them when he returned to Laguna Beach—the one who had grown up riding shotgun with his dad, listening to books on tape by Kerouac or Burroughs; gliding through the Mount Shasta backcountry; cutting class to tear off a few lips at Thalia Street; getting shitfaced with beautiful women at the bars in Cabo. But a month after the quake, it was clear that he was no longer an aimless ex-pro surfer in search of an Act II. For the first time since Jon Rose was a kid, surfing could wait. "Seeing death and destruction on that level changed my life forever," Rose says. "I didn't just find myself at a crossroads. It was nonnegotiable. My new job is: I'm going to help people."



PHOTOS: ROSE COLLECTION

Jon's parents, Jack and Leslie (pictured), divorced while living in Mount Shasta. Jack pulled his 9-year-old son from fourth grade for a months-long camping trip through Mexico. "We spent two weeks in Cabo when there were still no hotels," Jon remembers. "My dad's friend had property north of Puerto Vallarta. We bribed our way onto a ferry then stayed for three months. I caught my first waves there on my dad's 6'4". If I look back on life and the decisions I've made, it all traces back to that trip."

Jon's parents Jack and Leslie met in Colorado a year before their son was born, on February 22, 1978. Jack was a surf- and ski-bum carpenter who grew up in the South Bay of Los Angeles. The young family spent a year in the mountains before moving to a tiny cottage in Laguna Beach. Jack built houses from Corona Del Mar to Three Arch Bay.

Three years later, he was offered a job in Mount Shasta, building the ski resort and directing the ski school. "Those years were crucial. We got Jon out of Orange County and into a small town," Jack says. "In Laguna, he'd see a Lamborghini and say, 'I want one of those.' In Shasta, there's not a single new car, so that wasn't in his daily message. The mountains overrode all that."

When Jon was 8, his parents split on amicable terms. Leslie left for Oregon on a spiritual quest. "Which I accepted," says Jack, "because we were both sort of on the same thing."

Jack gave his son two options when they returned to Southern California after three more years: A Mission Viejo tract house in which Jon could have his own bedroom, or a tiny studio in Laguna. The choice, even at age 11, was obvious.

Jon quickly established himself as a Thalia Street rat. His father took a particular shine to a towheaded ripper named Hans Hagen, who was seven years Jon's senior, with equally cosmic parents. "I kind of took Jon under my wing,"

MICHEL LALANDE



TOM AIELLO



STRUNTZ

Rose finds himself consistently amazed by the individuals who step up in the places he visits. "It doesn't have to be someone from a specialized background—a teacher, doctor, or businessman—it can be a 17-year-old kid," he says.

says Hagen. "He knew instinctively how to navigate among the locals. I called him 'the boy with the man head,' because he was so curious about everything."

Jon began competing seriously in his early teens. He met Jordan Tappis, a San Fernando Valley kid, at a contest in Santa Cruz. The pair bonded over mutual interests in art, books, and music. "We spent our younger lives trying to be pro surfers," Tappis says. "But the pro surfing world didn't foster much creative thought. I'd travel with books and records and people thought I was crazy. Jon traveled with four books of CDs. When I started up the label [Record Collection], at 21, Jon told me, 'You gotta hear The Walkmen.' I signed them to our very first deal."

By age 17, Rose's sponsorship with Quiksilver allowed him to travel on the ASP tour. "I definitely soaked it all up," he says with a grin as he recalls the mischief and debauchery of those years.

Friends remember Rose as a resourceful traveler and indulgent partier. He might have passed out alone at midnight behind a Tokyo bar in a pool of his own spew, yet he'd still somehow make it 100 miles to the coast for his next heat. "It was a really cool time," he says. "You could run amok, and be well paid. There was always the danger of going over to The Dark Side. I mean, you could buy 40s out of the vending machines in Japan. But I had a good



LOGAN MOCK-BUNTING

In 2011, Waves for Water set up in Afghanistan with the US Military. Rose worked in active war zones wearing full body armor. The military/nonprofit collaboration was the first of its kind, supplying 30,000 Afghans with clean water.

barometer. Mostly I was the guy taking care of my friends. I do still have horns, though."

After three years of mediocre contest results, Rose opted out of competing on the tour after convincing his sponsors to let him travel on his own. In Padang, Chris Van Lennep snapped Rose's first *Surfing* cover. Later, a win at a celebrity poker tournament financed a dirt bike Rose didn't even know how to ride. He traveled the entire length of the Baja peninsula for *Surfing* and *Outside*. He published a photo-driven book about an inland passage through the US and Mexico titled *Towards Miles*. "It was a mid-20s soul search," he says. "I'd gone around the world to find waves, but had never checked out my country."

With his 20s drawing nigh, Jon married his longtime sweetheart, Lisa, and paid way too much for a condo in

Laguna. He signed on as a photographer and lifestyle figurehead with Trovata, a clothing company described by the *New York Times* as a "rustic-prep sportswear line." But when the real estate market crashed Trovata, and Rose, nearly went broke. "Everything imploded," says Hagen. "Jon was in a very dark place."

Through these uncertain times, Jack Rose remained a source of stability. He had long made it a practice to include rainwater systems on homes he built in dry areas of California. But it still amazed Jon when his father flew to Kenya on his own dime and started a nonprofit organization called Raincatcher, to teach locals how to install his catchment systems.

Early on, Jack came up against the problem of how to purify the water gathered by his systems to make it clean

for drinking. Jon began investigating filtration systems for his dad while living in California. Then, at Jack's urging, he planned his 2009 mission to install a catchment/filtration system in a village on the dry side of a Balinese volcano. "When a son follows the same career as the father, the torch is passed," says Jack, looking back on his son's early relief work in Padang. "It was a natural progression."

Jon holds no illusions about what he terms an almost naïve empathy for the impoverished people he encountered during his earlier travels. "I was conscious and compassionate," he recalls. "But it was more, you'd go places and say, 'Wow, this is crazy. Look at how poor these people are. Here, have some stickers and T-shirts.' 'Gee, when's the tide getting low?...' This would be something to give back, but it was totally selfish, because it was an excuse to surf."



TOM SERVAIS

Rose's first surf at Cloudbreak as a teenager was a career highlight. By his 20s, his priorities shifted.

It's a cheerless morning in late January and the Jon Rose of 2013 is cruising through Ortley Beach, New Jersey—a square-mile sliver of sand and splintered wood wedged between Lavalette and Seaside Heights. In the nine years since I last saw Jon in person, his work has left its imprint. He's still got the looks—and the game—to reel in the likes of Pamela Anderson (they dated for nearly a year and a half, before breaking up, but remain close). Yet he bears the grizzled lines of many years beneath the sun, his hair prematurely salt and pepper.

He has witnessed events he could have scarcely imagined a half-decade ago. The result seems an expression of constant alertness mingled with fatigue. He hasn't surfed much lately, excepting a recent swell that heaved frigid stand-up barrels onto Jersey's sandbars. "My body's tweaked," he says, rubbing his neck. "It's so weird here. You don't surf for a month. Then when it comes, you go full on."

Ortley is among the most ruined places I've ever seen—and I say that as a South Carolinian whose home was trashed by Hurricane Hugo back in 1989. Along southeastern shores, most beachside buildings rest atop pilings. But here they're built at ground level. Sandy's 11-foot surge thus tore them to shreds. Floated Volkswagens and Explorers lie askew in yards. Surviving homes are so wracked with mold that they're deathtraps without a respirator. Sand's been puked into every alleyway while towering garbage piles hold photo albums, file cabinets, mattresses, TVs, stereos, and fungus-caked refrigerators. Window stickers read "Ortley Strong," but the town is a funereal place, mostly devoid of people. It's like this along 200 miles of coast.

Today Catherine Murphy, organizational guru of Rose's nonprofit Waves for Water, has arranged for him to help deliver \$122,000 in grant checks to a myriad of hurricane victims.

I'm curious as to why an organization ostensibly formed to deliver clean drinking water—whether in Afghanistan, Port au Prince or more recently, North Korea ("I firmly believe that every person within 50 yards of us the whole time we were there was placed there. It was *The Truman Show* meets *Hunger Games*.")—has set up where nobody's really thirsty. "I was compelled from being a surfer," Rose says. "I have personal friends here. On its face, what we're doing here is totally different. But really, it's no different. I've never really had a reason to say this, but Waves for Water still takes part in every aspect of disaster relief."

Rose offers the example of prior relief work in Haiti after the January 22, 2010 earthquake, the strongest quake to hit the island since 1770. When he received news of the disaster, he had just arrived in Hawaii after his long-delayed trip to Bali. He was obsessing over getting a large shipment

of filters back to Padang after just having surfed what he calls "the best session ever" at 20-foot Makaha when his phone rang.

Sean Penn had seen a report on Waves for Water's Indonesian efforts. He was chartering a plane and stuffing it with medical volunteers and first aid gear. Could Rose arrange 4,000 filters immediately? "I said, 'Yeah, it's absolutely viable,' though I only had 1,000 filters on hand. So [Sean] says, 'Let's go tomorrow.'"

Indonesia had only partially prepared Rose for Haiti. The earthquake killed over 200,000 and damaged or flattened 250,000 buildings. Dead children lay in the streets and Rose watched front-end loaders roll bloated bodies into mass graves. Yet he kept working—living in a stifling tent, with next to no money, eating donated food—for nearly a year. "I realized right there that I have a weird ability to compartmentalize stuff," he says. "I somehow managed to turn off every emotion, every feeling. Eventually that really fucked me up."

When the other 3,000 filters reached Florida, Penn sent a rickety, unpressurized vintage DC-4. "A bunch of fucking air pirates were flying it," Rose says. "There were other pallets on the runway—medical gear and a bunch of stuff—but there wasn't room for it all and no one was overseeing it. I told 'em, 'None of this shit goes, only my stuff.'" The captain says, "Whatever you want. You're the only one who bothered to show up."

Rose's budding commando skills helped little in other situations. While helping supervise a broiling refugee camp of 50,000 desperate Haitians—gang members, young rape victims, vodou practitioners, and dying elderly—he found himself sitting on a stash of filters. Due to a clear shortage, he realized that handing them out had the potential start a riot. Eventually, he found a pastor. "How do I distribute these?" Rose asked. The pastor knew immediately: "Every pregnant woman should have one," he told Rose.

"We can't help everyone," says Rose. "But a fair criteria exists. You just have to find people you trust to help discover it."

Over time, Rose has also learned that the best way to work in a disaster zone is to employ locals. "Don't bring in Brian O'Neill from Ireland to handle Haitian transportation like everyone else," he says. "Who gives a shit if he worked in Uganda? In Haiti, he doesn't know anything more than you."

William Gardner, the United Nations officer tasked with violence reduction in Haitian slums and camps, worked closely with Waves for Water after the earthquake. He believes that Rose is on a trajectory that will one day place him in the company of James Grant, a former UNICEF director whose disease prevention programs have arguably saved millions. Gardner also expressed amazement at an operational model that utilizes no official headquarters, but is run from the cell phones of Jon, Jack, Catherine Murphy, and three close friends of Jon's—the brothers Christian, Adam, and Jason Troy.



Waves for Water is lightweight by design, connected by cell phones and relying on help from civilians to increase scale. Its Clean Water Couriers program aims to connect with anyone willing to help spread the easily transported filters. “When you begin to multiply that by the millions of travelers you’ve got complete global change. The only way I know to encourage that is to lead by example.”

One of William Gardner’s peers is Brian Woolworth, a former member of the US Military’s 82nd Airborne Division who coordinated relief work with Rose when Pakistan suffered flooding that displaced 20 million. Woolworth also helped organize Rose’s ongoing work in Afghanistan’s Kunar Valley. He, too, spoke to the highly efficient nature of Waves for Water. “Gardner and I don’t like to sit on our thumbs,” he says. “We wanted to be more aggressive, but usually you don’t see NGOs acting like that... [Rose] has flattened his organization to a point where he can say, ‘This is the need and this is the solution’—with no bullshit in between.”

Woolworth noted that he had only witnessed that level of efficiency in his time serving in the Special Forces. As a show of support for Rose’s work, he says, “I gave Jon my

SOF ring. I told him, ‘You act in every sense like a Green Beret.’ But, of course, he doesn’t follow a commander-in-chief. He just follows his heart.”

On this dreary day, the first place Jon’s heart leads us is just down the road from Ortley in Seaside Heights, not far from a Waves for Water site. The organization has distribution hubs like this one all along the coast. They act as a sort of supply chain, run by people who know the community well.

One such person I meet that day is Mike Colombo, owner of Seaside’s Right Coast Surf Shop. His 53-year-old home had never flooded prior to Sandy. Since the hurricane he’s been living upstairs while renovating, mostly alone. “Yesterday, my 13-year-old just broke down crying,” he says. “She’s over it, man.”



COPPOLA/FRAME

Rose keeps a small cottage in Topanga Canyon, though he’s currently based in New York to continue his post-Sandy relief work. He also spends a week each month in Haiti. At 35, he surmises that he’ll continue on this pace for at least five more years, with occasional stops in Southern California to surf and recharge.

Late that afternoon, I ask about one consequence of the rush he experiences from this work—coping with the horrors he’s witnessed. Rose takes a draft of whiskey from his hip flask and begins describing his return home from Haiti, near the time of his divorce. One afternoon, he broke his foot while surfing Thalia. He couldn’t surf or leave again to Haiti to continue his relief work. “That’s when I realized I had some challenges. I was numb—to family, friends, everybody. I don’t know if I had PTSD, but I wasn’t right.”

Rose sought out the help of a therapist experienced in dealing with war veterans, but he felt unresponsive to the treatment. Finally, at the end of one of their sessions, his therapist said they’d “unlocked something.” Rose didn’t feel it at first. Later that night, after going out with some friends, Rose started crying uncontrollably—with ten people standing around him in a kitchen. “I cried for 40 minutes,” he says, “having this mental slideshow: where I’d seen a dead child or just horrendous stuff, some of which I’ll never be able to repeat to anyone. I guess I was just finally allowing myself to see and feel those emotions. It wasn’t like everything was just fine after that, but it was a huge exhale. What I learned is that you can turn your emotions off for awhile, but you’re going to have to process and deal with it at some point.”

Waves for Water has carried Rose into terrible and awe-inspiring circumstances. It has allowed him to surf the Amazon tidal bore, climb mountains in Nepal, and help hundreds of thousands of people. I ask how much he still identifies as the selfish pro surfer he was when this whole journey began. “I’m still selfish,” he says. “But being a selfish surfer was just the precursor to this. People have said to me, ‘God, you make me feel bad about my life and what I’m doing. But I say, ‘Wait a minute. I’m not doing anything to you. You’re making yourself feel that way. It’s your life. You’re the author of your own story. How it turns out is up to you.’” ■

Later, Rose quietly hands him a check as tears well in Colombo’s eyes. A similar exchange is repeated several more times throughout the day. “We use the helping the helpers model,” Rose explains. “Get guys like [Colombo] back on their feet, and they help others. Then the others we help are suicidal and have no resources—nothing.”

We drive up to a tiny, soggy bungalow just half a block from the ocean, owned by a woman named Linda. The words “Help Me” are scrawled on one wall. When Linda’s check appears, the haunted look in her eyes is replaced with wonderment and more tears.

The soul-filling rush that Jon Rose gains from all of this is obvious. He agrees: “It’s incredibly gratifying. And it’s great to not have surfing be an obsession. Eventually you come to realize that there will always be waves.”