

Surf Champion Keala Kennelly

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What the Waves Taught Her

The ocean knew Keala Kennelly before she was even out of the womb. Her mother surfed while six months pregnant. So, when Kennelly says, “I think I was surfing before I was born,” it’s not an exaggeration - it’s the literal truth. Keala’s life is one of contradictions: both taking shape exactly as she thought it would while defying everyone else’s expectations of the path she should be on.

Kennelly dreamed of being a pro surfer from the time she was a little girl. She became one, despite the sport she loved insisting, for decades, that a female professional surfer of her caliber couldn’t exist. And Pipeline, the heavy, unforgiving wave that has broken bones, boards, and reputations for generations? Kennelly conquered it. “I got told so many times over the course of my life and my career that females can’t surf or ride big waves like Pipeline,” she says. “We could.”

Those two words sum up Kennelly’s entire story. It’s the story of what happens when the world refuses to give you permission. So, you stop asking.

The Burden of Being Alone

During those early years at Pipeline, she was often the only woman in the lineup. The men would “burn” her, dropping in on her waves and taking what was hers. “They just don’t think you’re going to actually take off,”

she says. So she did. Again, and again, and again. Eventually, the male surfers stopped doubting her. Kennelly had even less doubt in herself. A Hawaiian female surfer. Riding the heaviest wave on her island. Refusing to be moved.

A peculiar thing happens when you stand alone in your category: you learn to carry a weight that the rest of the world doesn't see. Keala carried two burdens: she was a woman in a sport that didn't want her. And she was a young gay woman in a culture that treated the word lesbian like a slur. "It became that kind of derogatory term where it discounted their ability," she says. "If they were more masculine, or if they were lesbian." She stayed quiet about her sexual orientation for years, afraid the truth would cost her the dream she'd had since she was small.

When she finally came out, she described the feeling as "one of the most freeing feelings I've ever felt in my life." She did it publicly, on a tour where almost no one had done it before. It was yet another example of her kicking the door down, instead of waiting to be let into the room.

For anyone still bearing the brunt of the burden she once carried, Kennelly has simple wisdom. "It's going to be hard. It's scary. But, oh my god, it feels so good to just be yourself."

A Second Act, Behind the Decks

You'd think being ranked among the best women surfers in the world would be enough accomplishment for one lifetime. For Kennelly, it was the warm-up.

These days, she's also DJ KK. The pivot wasn't random - DJing grew out of something she'd been paying attention to her whole life. "It started from a young age, just going and hearing music, and you'd have a really fun night or a kind of so-so night, and it usually depended on how good the music was." So she made a decision that will sound familiar to anyone who's followed her career. "I'm a control freak," she laughs, "and I have to be in control of how my night's going to go."

It's the same instinct that put her at Pipeline. Whether it's the night or the wave, don't wait for the world to deliver what you want. Don't wait for the night, the wave, the world to deliver what you want. Go out there and get it yourself.

Sometimes people at her shows recognize her from her other life and short-circuit a little. "Wait - what are you doing? What are you doing?" She finds it funny. The confusion is the point. Women aren't supposed to be pro surfers. Famous female surfers aren't supposed to be gay. And a DJ can't be a former pro surfer. Kennelly is just doing what she's always done: sticking to her guns, kicking the door down, and refusing to be boxed into one category.

Friday Nights at Swell

You can find her on Friday nights at 'Alohilani, where she holds a residency at [Swell](#), the rooftop pool bar that looks out over Waikiki toward Queens. The cabanas, the fire pits, the infinity pool catching the last of the sun - she describes the whole scene in the kind of shorthand only a local uses for a place they actually love. Good vibes all around.

It's an evening that sneaks up on you. Maybe you came to Waikiki for the beach, the surf, or an excuse to stop answering email for a week. You wander up to the roof for a drink before dinner. A woman at the decks is reading the crowd the way she once read a wave. The sky is doing what the sky does here. Somewhere below

you the ocean is still moving the way it moved when Kennelly was six months in utero. And, suddenly, the night turns into one you'll tell people about when you get home.

That's the thing about this place. Whether it's the ocean or the people, you don't have to look very hard to find a story worth bringing back.

There's a Lesson in Every Wave

Surfing teaches you something that's hard to learn any other way: that the thing you're afraid of and the thing you want are often the exact same thing. The same wave that could send you crashing beneath the surf is the same one that could carry you. When you embrace fear, only then are you truly free.

Keala's whole life has been a long demonstration of that lesson, applied in one room after another - a sport, an identity, a second career, a rooftop in Waikīkī on a Friday night. At every turn, Kennelly does the thing people said couldn't be done, and then she's off in search of another barrier to smash.

You don't have to be a pro surfer to take something from Kennelly's story. You just have to be willing, every once in a while, to do the unexpected.

Every wave is a question. You answer it by paddling out.