



Inch boy inch

photo by Amanda Pitts

Father's inspiration helps law professor accomplish journey around Lake Superior — by Dottie Barnes

Star Swift's family would tell you she was always the athletic type and constantly on the move. In fact, Swift would sometimes skip school to go sailing or boating and would spend nearly every day of her summer break sailing. It's no surprise that the associate professor in the Seidman College of Business would later turn her love for the open water into a courageous and dangerous trip around the greatest of the Great Lakes.

Swift came to Grand Valley in 1992. Shortly after that, she developed a passion for kayaking in waters all over the world. In the late 1990s, she paddled in Greenland, Newfoundland and Chile.

"I'd read about these beautiful areas in environmental magazines and how people are trying to preserve the water and the areas surrounding the

water," said Swift. "I decided I wanted to go and experience these places before they are forever changed."

Swift spent a month paddling in Greenland in 1998 and then went to Patagonia, Chile, in 1999. "I saw incredible beauty in both places," she said. "The icebergs in Greenland were the size of the Pentagon. And there was never darkness, so it wasn't unusual to eat dinner at 3 a.m."

It was after these trips that Swift decided to begin intense training to kayak around Lake Superior. It would take a year of preparation to get herself in top shape, perfect her kayaking skills, and chart her course.

"I worked with a trainer to build my upper body strength," she explained. "I spent weeks in a pool with my kayak, practicing rolls. The waves and wind of Lake

Superior can be quite strong."

Swift finished the last month of her training in Big Bay, along Lake Superior, where she would begin her journey. She packed boxes full of food (a vegetarian diet) and gear and mailed them to post offices along her mapped course. She carried few supplies: a small sleeping bag, dry suit, life jacket, water purifier, marine radio, GPS, tent, cooking supplies and a silk mask and hat to protect her from the sun.

On June 10, 2000, Swift paddled away from Big Bay in a 17-foot kayak. The 80-day expedition would mean paddling in the cold, harsh waters of Lake Superior for about 13 hours a day. That summer turned out to be one of the coldest on record in the Upper Peninsula. The weather was windy and rainy during much of the two-

and-a-half month journey, causing several delays that put Swift off schedule.

"As a lawyer, I like things planned out and organized. I learned how to be patient on this trip," she said.

Swift's course took her west to Keweenaw Bay and the Portage River that separates the twin cities of Houghton and Hancock. She said the constant wind and rain took its toll physically and mentally.

"I cried a lot," she recalled. "I would call my dad from pay phones when I got into towns. He was very ill at the time. When I told him I didn't think I could do it, he told me to think of it like inches on a map instead of a whole journey. He told me inches turn into miles. He said he looked at his illness that way and it kept him moving forward."

Swift's first name is Maris Stella, which is Latin for



“star of the sea.” Swift’s dad thought it was too long a name for such a little baby, so shortly after her birth, he called her Star. The name stuck and so did his advice.

Inches did turn into miles — several hundred miles, as Swift continued her journey to Gooseberry Falls State Park in Minnesota; Grand Portage, Minnesota; and Rosspport, Ontario. Although it was planned as a solo trip, she was able to travel with friends part of the way. Swift was with two friends just before reaching Rosspport, where they made a gruesome discovery.

“We stopped for lunch on a beach and while hiking, my friends came upon a dead body,” she said.

“The man had apparently committed suicide. I called the Canadian Coast Guard.

“It makes you wonder what could make someone feel so hopeless. I was in such a different place at the time. I felt privileged to be able to make such an extraordinary journey. Paddling through the strong forces of nature changes your perspective.”

Swift plotted her course close to the shoreline, but had to make many crossings over 10 miles in order to make up for weather delays. “They were hard because the more crossings I made, the more I understood the risk,” she said. “The main problem with crossings is it requires you to

be out in open water and wind, and there is no way anyone can get to you in time if you go over with a loaded boat and can’t get back up. The water is so cold and you’re merely a dot in the elements. Plus, lack of radio communication was a real problem around most of the lake. You are truly left to your own resources.”

The last leg of the trip took Swift to Neys Provincial Park and Wawa, Ontario; Grand Marais and Marquette, Michigan. Near the end, she experienced something she had little of during the trip — sunshine, blue skies and large, gentle waves. She had done it. She had circumnavigated Lake Superior. But, it wasn’t without hardship.

“It was like a continuous marathon,” she remembered. “By the end, my arms and hands hurt so badly, I couldn’t even unzip my sleeping bag.”

Swift kept a journal and said she learned a lot about herself throughout the journey. “The biggest change I experienced was becoming more patient. And, I’ve learned that I need less and less material goods. I had so little with me on the trip. You learn how little you really need.”

In an article Swift wrote for *Sea Kayaker* in 2001, she recounted the words of an elderly man she met near the end of her trip: “You will remember this trip for the rest of your life. But, it

isn’t how many miles that you will remember, is it? It’s what you learned to feel and see along the way.”

Swift has now taken up rowing. She learned, through a magazine article, that rowing can be much faster than kayaking. “A kayak is tippy and your legs are constantly locked underneath to keep the boat steady. With rowing, your legs and stomach muscles are always moving,” she explained.

Sunday mornings are a favorite time for Swift to take her Echo shell — a combination kayak, rowing shell — out on the waters of Lake Michigan or the Grand River. It gives her quiet time to escape daily commitments

and reflect on the support from her family, especially her dad, who died last October.

“My dad had severe osteoporosis that we didn’t know about, and one day, his spine simply dropped by six inches,” she shared. “He was required to learn to walk again and the doctors were amazed that he could because they said his spine was like a line of sand.

“Dad was one of my dearest friends. He was trying to learn how to walk and I was learning basic lessons, too.

“I now realize we were actually going through our trips together.”



photos courtesy of Star Swift

(Top photo) Star Swift navigates through the waters of Lake Superior during an 80-day expedition in 2000. Swift is pictured with her dad, John Swift, in September 2007. She credits him with helping her finish her kayaking adventure.