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LIVING FULLY CAPABLE with Allison Compton

Cover photo by Mark Nicholas



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AN EXCLUSIVE MAGAZINE SERVING THE RESIDENTS OF MANHATTAN BEACH

LIVING FULLY CAPABLE

with Allison Compton

By Kim Smith



Allison Compton is an athlete. Though both female and disabled, she does not subscribe to the notion that either leave her at a disadvantage. Born with an underdeveloped femur that now supports a prosthetic leg, Allison's world has always included her disability but has never been defined by it. She earned a spot as the only female on the USA Men's Paralympic standing volleyball team in Sydney in 2000 and then fought for the beginning of the Women's Sitting Volleyball contention for Athens in 2004. Allison never accepted a lesser status in life as a woman or as a disabled individual; she saw her life with as much potential as any non-disabled individual, male or female. She willingly staked her claim in the world as a disabled woman and has fought for both communities to be heard and understood her entire adult life.

Allison and her family of six grew up on the corner of First Street and Manhattan Avenue right in the heart of Manhattan Beach. As a kid, even with a disability from birth, she felt accepted and part of the pack. She never knew what it was like to have a fully capable body, and therefore did not let that fact be an excuse to sit out of the fun. Allison was the first to rouse beach-goers to play a pickup game of beach volleyball or go for a swim in the ocean. She never let her disability define her, and as such it empowered her to become a woman with a mission.

Allison first realized this mission on an indoor volleyball court. She participated in sports like every other child, excelling in both basketball and volleyball. She played at American Martyrs High School in Manhattan Beach and never once felt isolated from her team. Other schools raised no opposition. Her friends and residents of Manhattan Beach were supportive and inclusive, a luxury that Allison knows not every disabled person gets. She recalls her childhood fondly saying she was raised to believe that, "you can do anything; you are equal." Manhattan Beach created that in her, something that she will never forget nor take advantage of.

In high school, one of Allison's coaches told her about a standing volleyball team for disabled athletes, so she called to inquire about their program. She learned that the sport was currently only offered for men, no women's team existed. To Allison, that was no problem; she pursued the prospect of being the only female among the men. "I didn't think it was a big deal," she recalls. "I just figured, I'll play with them [in the 2000 Paralympics], and then we'll make a women's team." She earned her spot among the men exhibiting skill and strength and proving her value on their roster.

The team competed both internationally and nationally. In the States, no one had a problem. Across the globe, they ran into more opposition. In her first international tournament, the referees kicked her off the court during warmups and refused to recognize her as an athlete. Though a female playing was barred nowhere in the rules, Allison and her team knew this might happen. She was prepared but still felt like she let people down. In a small gym in the middle of Poland full of men, she could not sit on the bench with her team. She was forced to join the crowd in full uniform.

Allison was fighting tears determined not to give the officials the satisfaction. Shaking and nervous, she avoided eye contact with the Polish fans nearby. At one point in the match, USA was losing, and one of the Polish spectators that she had been so wary of leaned over and gruffly said, "Maybe they let you play? Maybe you win." Breathing out a laugh and sigh a relief, Allison realized what the reality of the situation was. Her teammates, the coaches and fans did not care that she was a woman on a men's team. The system is what she needed to fight, the preconceived notion that a woman was not equal to her male counterparts. At the time, there was no volleyball available to female athletes with physical disabilities. So not only was she barred from competing with male athletes that she was equal to in talent and ability, but she was also unable to compete at all. Something needed to change.

Leading up to the 2000 Summer Paralympics, her team jumped through hoops to get Allison cemented as a recognized athlete on the USA Paralympic Standing Volleyball team. The Olympic Committee left the decision up to arbitration giving one judge in Geneva, Switzerland the final say in Allison's 2000 Paralympic destiny. They found out two days before going to the Paralympics in





Sydney that he would not allow her to play. Her team quickly changed her title from “athlete” to “media person” which allowed Allison to go to Sydney, but again she was unable to compete with her team for the highest athletic honor there is. Her team also placed her fourth in the flag bearing Opening Ceremonies, but as the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) rejected her as an athlete, Allison was not able to accept the honor and watched from the cheap seats yet again.

When she returned home from Sydney, she knew what she had to do. “I didn’t want anyone else to go through what I did,” she states. There was a contradiction between the love of her teammates, coaches and fans with the denial of her capabilities by the establishment that she had to face. She felt the weight of the world to rectify the issue. Luckily, her relegation to the stands attracted media attention; other players knew what was happening and were supportive of Allison’s cause. Only the Swiss judge, the World Organization of Volleyball Disabled and the IPC were opposing her.

Knowing she only had to fight the establishment fueled Allison’s fire. Four years of hard work by her and others in her corner resulted in the first Paralympic games to include a Women’s Sitting Volleyball contention. Not only that, but she also led her team to the Bronze Medal match that year in Athens. They won their medal on a final point by Allison.

After her stellar Paralympic run, Allison retired in 2004 and committed her life to building her career, starting a family of her own and to raising awareness for people with disabilities. She now travels the country to tell her story and counsels parents of children with disabilities. Leveraging her life story, Allison wisely speaks to the worries and questions of both the children and their parents. She is an ambassador for Angel City Sports, a Los Angeles-based foundation that provides free training and equipment to young disabled athletes (see Philanthropy Spotlight on page 13 to learn more about Angel City Sports). Angel City Sports is one of Allison’s favorite outreach opportunities. Sports are near and dear to her heart. She loves seeing confidence building in the kids and the reaction of

their parents. Families who did not picture their child as an athlete see the natural abilities found within their disability.

Allison has also started Team Freeda – a social media hashtag and platform designed to offer a fresh perspective on disability awareness. Freeda is the nickname of her prosthetic leg, intentionally spelled Freeda referencing “Freedom.” They aim to challenge the status quo of disability education. Through this platform, their goal is to expand awareness about disability, inspire unity and bring people together through education. They beg the question, “What does disability look like?” They share both funny and inspiring stories making their subjects more relatable. They want to allow people to share in the freedom that awareness brings. Anyone can learn more and join the movement by visiting her website (included in footnotes).

Now married with three children and living in Manhattan Beach, Allison sees how exposure to her disability has normalized it for her children. Freeda is not taboo in the Compton household. Allison’s morning ritual includes being handed her prosthetic leg by one or more of her three daughters. They know mommy needs Freeda to get up out of bed, so Freeda to them is an essential part of the family. Her kids see people with disabilities the same way they see all people, something that she is proud to have instilled in them and knows is crucial to treating disabled people as equals.

Allison is tall and strong and beautiful; she does not look like what people picture when they think of a disabled person. She is often scoffed at for parking in handicapped spots by passersby that believe she is parking illegally. Allison has been followed through stores by skeptical eyes making sure she indeed has a physical disability. She loves the shock she often sees when people realize she is physically disabled. Allison finds it hilarious and sees her lot in life as an opportunity. With this unique position, she feels



has the best of both worlds: she understands and is a part of the disabled community but also easily blends in with the able-bodied population.

Allison has learned throughout her life that she is a part of two communities that need to be spoken up for – people with physical disabilities and women. Brave and undaunted, she has boldly started conversations and movements to bring equality where it has been desperately needed. By first starting a Women’s Volleyball contention in an all-male sport and then spending her athletic retirement speaking out for and supporting disability awareness, Allison has done her part in bettering the world. “This is our time for people with disabilities and women,” she passionately states. “It’s about empowerment. It’s our time for everyone to be unified – we are so much better together.” As part of two categories of people that had traditionally gone unheard, Allison considers raising awareness for both as a responsibility that she gladly bears.

Do you know a neighbor who has a story to share? Nominate your neighbor to be featured in one of our upcoming issues! Contact us at ksmith@bestversionmedia.com.

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