Photo - Gareth Care Unger - Hazel diving into the New Year

PLUNGE

By Alice Granleese

I love the feeling of a new year. Like diving into cool clear water; it's deliciously refreshing and makes you feel like a new person – sparkly and rejuvenated! We all get to start again, have another go, set intentions, be different.

When I was a kid, I often felt shy or nervous in new situations. My worry about what others thought of me sometimes stopped me from doing things. I didn't want to go in that race or do that activity because I might make a mistake or I didn't have the right clothes. I clearly remember going to swimming club for the first time. I might have been 10 or 11. Mum encouraged me to do it because some of my friends from school also went and from an early age, I clearly loved water. As a toddler, we would arrive at the beach and when Mum and Dad would look up from putting our stuff down, they'd see my head bobbing in the white wash of the waves! I've always had this compulsion to swim.

But going to swimming club was scary. Why? Probably because I'd never done it before. I didn't have a proper racing costume or a cap. I didn't know how the handy-cap thing worked. There would be people I didn't know.

The thing about trying new things is that you must first have the courage to say you will try. You take a risk. That risk means making yourself vulnerable. You might look a bit funny or make a mistake. People might laugh. But I can assure you, you will be rewarded for your bravery – for you will find in yourself something new. Perhaps a new talent, or something that feels truly amazing! Maybe you will discover things that you don't like, and that's ok. Life is about experiencing things. And when you try something new for the first time and the activity comes to an end, you feel a sense of achievement. You did it! Even if you made a mistake or didn't enjoy it much, you still did it.

Luckily, I was blessed with a very supportive mum. She was always there with me when things got scary or nerve-racking. I also had some lovely friends who I spent a lot of time underwater with when all the races were done. We would dance and somersault through the water, dive and leap into the pool. We would lie on the bottom and watch the sunlight stream through the water and our bubbles rise to the surface. My love for the water grew as I continued to swim in a squad and improve my technique. The sensation of gliding through the water and feeling the power in my hands and feet was a gift. When things weren't going so well in other parts of my life, I had swimming to comfort me.

I still love swimming and love competing in ocean swims. The ocean is a place that gives me a deep sense of peace. What a feeling it is to be all that way out to sea! A tiny person in a vast expanse of water. So small, yet connected; part of something bigger (hopefully not a shark! For the record I have never seen any sea life during an ocean swim). I am not the fastest swimmer, nor will I win any medals or competitions, but I win within myself.

Some tips to plunge into the new year:
• **Learn to laugh at yourself! Life is better when you're smiling. No one is perfect.**
• **Mistakes are good and we learn from them. Keep giving your best effort and be kind to those learning new things.**
• **There is no one like you. You are special and unique. Don't hide your light away!**
• **Talk to your friends and the adults in your life if something makes you feel nervous. You can also draw or write about it.**