

# Katherine & Rob

## Katherine and Rob's story is quite remarkable

In 2005 they moved to Canada for a job opportunity with their children aged 7,6 and 4. They both work in the pharmaceutical industry. Apart from some of the expected re-settling issues, they were happy in Canada. The children were doing well in school and the family used to do a lot together including Tae Kwon do.

However, in 2013 their eldest daughter Clare aged 15, developed an eating disorder and was suffering with depression. Kathryn says "Her struggle with mental health was much worse than we realised and sadly she took her own life."

Because of different rules around patient confidentiality in Canada, Kathryn and Rob unfortunately weren't able to find out what the issues were with Claire's illness which only added to the devastating impact of losing a child.

Rob recalls "When something like this happens to you, you feel as though you will never survive it. But we had two other children to consider and they were grieving as well, so we had to survive it. Kathryn and I talked a lot to each other and supported one other as a couple, but



it certainly took its toll on our health, particularly Kathryn's."

In 2015 Rob got a job offer back in the UK just outside Newmarket and he moved back first to set up the family home. The kids moved back a few months after him and Katherine stayed in Canada for a few more months to sell their house before she joined them all, but during this time she also lost her Mum.

Kathryn's health deteriorated and life was a real struggle. She gained a lot of weight and subsequently became diabetic, she suffered with high blood pressure and an under active thyroid. She knew she was in a bad place and she also knew she had to do something about it, otherwise she feared that her family would lose her too.

Kathryn said "I knew that I needed to take control of my health, do some activity, meet new people and start living again. I needed to take that step, I just wasn't sure how."

Then in 2016 my daughter Bethan signed up for the school's Great East Swim programme and she said to me "Mum, you should do this too."

So Kathryn thought about it and decided that she would try it. She wanted her daughter to see

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# case study

that she was trying too. Kathryn remembers “I was petrified when I went to the first session, I was so self-conscious of my size, I never thought I’d be able to do it and I thought I’d embarrass myself. I was the largest person there and I didn’t find the programme easy, in fact I found it quite difficult but I was determined, and I didn’t want to let my daughter down.”

Although Kathryn completed the programme in 2016, she developed bronchitis just before the Great East Swim, so she couldn’t actually take part in the event. But this didn’t stop her from continuing with swimming, and in 2017 she completed the programme again and eventually got to take part in the Swim.

Rob also took part in the 2017 programme because their daughter challenged him to do it. His health had also suffered since losing Claire, he had put on weight, was quite unfit, plus he had angina. But Rob also had an extreme fear of the water, so his decision to take part was particularly brave.

Rob said, “As a child, I almost drown in the sea, so although I was nervous in all water, I particularly hated outdoor swimming. But taking part in the programme made me so much more confident in the water. A few weeks before the Great East Swim, Rob took part in the familiarisation session at Alton Water to try out the wetsuits and he found them very restrictive. So the following weekend he decided to join the Seascape outdoor swimming group at Felixstowe to practice more, but Rob had a



panic attack in the water and had to get out right away. However, undeterred, Rob and Kathryn started going to Felixstowe every Saturday to swim and it’s fair to say they have completely got the outdoor swimming bug.

This year they have taken part in the Great North Swim, Great East Swim, Solva Sea Swim, Great Scottish Swim, Mill to Mill - Dedham to Flatford, Llangorse Swim in Wales, and the Serpentine Swim.

Kathryn has since lost 4.5 stone and she feels that swimming has been her saviour. She said, “I particularly like the way swimming makes me feel. It’s hard to explain, but it makes me feel as though I’m part of something bigger than myself. When I get my head down in the water, it’s the only time I feel at peace. And I love being part of nature, the therapeutic benefits are wonderful.”

She continued, “If I’m having a bad day and it gets to the point where I feel as though I can’t cope, I immediately think I need to have a swim, and this always improves how I feel.”

They actually live in Sudbury and now swim at Felixstowe two or three times a week. Rob said, “Following a traumatic experience in the sea as a child, never in my wildest dreams did I think I would be swimming in the sea, but by participating in The Great Swims, the confidence I’ve gained has given me the encouragement to overcome my fears and I have fallen in with love sea swimming and it has been so good for my mental health.

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“One thing we love about the swimming community is that they don’t care how good a swimmer you are, they only care about how you are and your safety”.

Rob now feels more motivated to do other things such as the parkruns, signing up for a London cycle event, and he’s applied for the London Marathon. He has also started fundraising for a national charity called Papyrus, whose mission is to reduce the number of young people who take their own lives by shattering the stigma around suicide and equipping young people and their communities with the skills to recognise and respond to suicidal behaviour.

Kathryn added, “The programme was just the beginning of the journey for me and it was an introduction to swimming. It’s a whole scene that I never would have dreamt I would fit into it. Because of your size you think people are going to judge you.

“I still don’t like myself in a swimsuit, but I don’t feel like anyone looks at my body, they look at what I’m achieving and how I am as a person. Since I’ve been swimming, not only have I lost weight but my diabetes is in remission, and my blood pressure is much better.



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## GREAT EAST SWIM 2018 OUTREACH PROGRAMME

**Supported by Suffolk County Council, Suffolk Sport, Sport England, Allied Health Professionals, and local pool operators, aims to support inactive residents, who want to make a change to their physical activity levels, using a mass participation challenge as their motivation.**

The programme, provides 12 weeks of supported coaching, encouragement, membership to their local pool, free wetsuit hire, fast-track physiotherapy support and entry to either the 1/2 mile or 1 mile Great East Open Water Swim held at Alton Water reservoir near Ipswich.

In 2018, 82 people between the ages of 18 and 64 registered to take start the programme with 72 completing it.

Many are continuing to swim and exercise on a regular basis and have made a positive change to their health and physical activity levels.

Our  
story