

Paddles through the pain barrier to raise awareness



On her 21st birthday recent Lincoln University graduate, Harriet Watson, set out to make a difference. She wanted to raise awareness about endometriosis, a condition affecting 1 in 10 Kiwi women. Relatively little is known about 'endo' as for decades, this has been a taboo subject, but through research and education, more women are able to manage the often-debilitating

pain that endo can cause.

Pain is nothing new, with Harriet having completed the 2-day Coast to Coast multisport event as a 16-year-old. In fact, it was Coast to Coast that introduced Harriet to the sport of kayaking, and she hasn't looked back. "I loved the feeling of kayaking through the Waimakariri Gorge and have spent time developing strength and improving my technique" says Harriet. "In fact, I loved it so much, I have devoted my attention to kayaking and mastering the techniques required to compete in K1 sprint kayaking, a discipline that requires focus, power and determination."

"Growing up, extreme pain with periods and regular PMS hugely affected my everyday life; some days I was in too much pain to go to school, some weeks I couldn't train or exercise, often I couldn't see my friends, and sometimes I couldn't even get out of bed."

Harriet's frustrations were finally heard by the supportive team at Endometriosis New Zealand. In 2019, she spoke to an ENZ advisor and within a month underwent Laparoscopic surgery to confirm her diagnosis with endometriosis, and to remove the adhesions caused by the condition. The support she received from ENZ, a non-government funded organisation, enabled her to get her life back to where she wanted it to be.

"Now, just over a year after my surgery, I am happy to say that my symptoms have significantly reduced and I am able to do things I never could; I can get through days without taking painkillers, I can enjoy spending time with my friends, and I can even exercise right throughout the month."

To raise awareness and provide funding to ENZ, Harriet set herself an ambitious physical challenge and set up a *givealittle* page, resulting in over \$4,300.00 being donated to ENZ. "And all I had to do was kayak 100km in my kayak" she said with a laugh. "The furthest I had ever paddled in a sprint kayak was 24km in one day, I planned to do 100km and I genuinely had no idea if it was even possible!"



The alarm buzzed at 2.50AM on the day – Harriet figured that even if she was able to do the distance, it could take 15-18 hours. “I didn’t know if I could do it, but knowing I was helping other endo sufferers was huge motivation for me. I pushed on to complete the 100km in just over 12hours.”

For Harriet, the coolest thing for her was the amount of support she got on the day. 26 support kayakers paddled alongside her at various times throughout the day – some of whom she had never met before. “When you think about it, that’s huge. If each of those people went away and told one other person about the cause, then the conversation has already reached more than 50 people! A huge number of people also came down to the side of the river in support too. That’s what it was all about – the more people I could get engaged with the cause, the better!”

Harriet has represented Arawa Canoe Club at NZ Canoe Racing Nationals with a highlight being starting in the lane next to current World and Olympic Champion Lisa Carrington in 200metre and 500metre Open Womens races in 2020.

“My original endo surgery helped a lot, but I’ve still been managing symptoms and recently needed to return for a second operation. The result was better than the first, but it made me, and others who know me, realise that endo is never completely ‘fixed’. This is why I want to make sure people know and understand the impact endo can have on our sisters, friends, colleagues and aunties...!”