

# SIUE alumnus makes historic solo kayak trip Around Hawaii's Big Island

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**EDWARDSVILLE** - Southern Illinois University Edwardsville alumnus **Jenny Decker**, a native of St. Louis, has made history as the first female and first documented solo kayaker to circumnavigate the **Big Island in Hawaii**.

For 20 days, from March 25-April 13, Decker battled the Pacific Ocean, paddling approximately 300 miles throughout 16 days to achieve the incredible feat. Through her journey, Decker raised awareness, and \$10,109 through her GoFundMe campaign, for Charcot Marie Tooth (CMT), an inherited neurological disorder from which she suffers.

“CMT can affect motor and sensory nerves, often resulting in muscle weakness, atrophy and sensory loss,” explained Decker, a 2006 alumnus of the SIUE School of Nursing, who works as a traveling nurse in intensive care units. “Performing everyday tasks and completing adventures often pushes my body to its limits, leaving me exhausted or injured.

“However, I feel fortunate to still be active and I refuse to let my weakening body interfere with my passions in life. My determination has always been stronger than my physical attributes.”

Decker spent one year planning and preparing for her historic paddle. With her aboard the 16-foot yellow kayak were a first aid kit, flare, radio, helmet, lifejacket, a solar panel to charge her phone, GoPro, radio, and a dry bag with a hammock, blankets, warm clothes and a meal.

A land crew traveled by foot or vehicle to support her and make sure she made it safely to her next destination.

“There’s miles and miles where it’s just cliffs of lava rock with nowhere to pull in,” Decker explained. “There are 11 different ecosystems of terrain. So some of the days, I had to anchor and swim in to shore, because either the surf was too big or the shoreline was full of coral reefs and lava rocks. There were times that I would get off the kayak and couldn’t stand. Some of my friends would have to come get me.”

While her journey finished in success, the dangerous expedition was not without its challenges.

“Three of the days I couldn’t paddle, because the U.S. Coast Guard had called small craft advisories,” she said. “But I did paddle through three other separate days of those advisories, because I knew the wind and the swells were actually going to be in my favor, pushing me. But, it wasn’t any less terrifying. I was basically out in 12-foot offshore breaking swells, throwing me around in 25 mph winds. The wind turns the ocean into a monster.”

Still, with each stroke of her paddle, she was one with the ocean and all of its beauty. As she neared her landing, Decker recalled the beautiful waterfalls, humpback whales, pods of dolphins, calm seas and terrifying seas that comprised her most memorable moments.

“This experience has taught me that no matter how physically challenging or mentally terrifying something is, if you put your mind to it, you can do it,” Decker said. “It still seems surreal. I smile at random times thinking about all of the wonderful things this experience has taught me.

“Throughout life, and in the ocean, you should never look back to focus on what you cannot change. Look at what is in front of you. Embrace your imperfections, and you can do anything you put your mind to.”

Decker, and her partner Krystal and friend Elizabeth, provided near daily updates online for those keeping track of her monumental journey. The updates can now be found in a blog online at [hnf-cure.org](http://hnf-cure.org). Donations can be made directly to the Hereditary Neuropathy Foundation to be used toward continued research for a cure to CMT.

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