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Riding Waves Of Change

Surfer Shares His Move Into Activism

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By NATE DELESLINE III

BRIDGEWATER — Three years ago, professional surfer Kyle Thiermann found a way to put his passion for protecting the environment into action.

Thiermann decided to combine surfing with producing short, online films about environmental issues. His efforts over the last few years have earned him national and international attention, but he insists on having plenty of fun along the way.

"I kind of saw that most people who were on the front lines creating change didn't look like they were having very much fun," Thiermann, 21, told several hundred Bridgewater College students during a presentation at the school last week. "I understand in your busy schedule, the last thing you need is to be lectured about another environmental crisis and another reason to feel hopeless."

Thiermann, who lives in Santa Cruz and has surfed all over the world, also said he makes a point to ensure that his documentaries don't leave people feeling discouraged. "I believe that people change for the long term more out of inspiration than out of fear," he said.

Thiermann's YouTube video series and blog, Surfing for Change, has gotten thousands of hits and made good waves in the surfing, business and environmental communities.

His first project, "Claim Your Change," examines the link between large banks and their role in financing a coal-fired power plant on a Chilean beach that he says would compromise the environment.

Although last year's major earthquake in Chile has delayed action on the power plant, Thiermann said he's still excited that he was able to inspire ordinary people to action. He said many people he's reached out to have heeded his call to move their money to banks that have what he calls more environmentally friendly values.

Upcoming Work

Thiermann's latest film, "Where is Away," documents plastic pollution in Hawaii and includes an appearance by musician and fellow surfer Jack Johnson. Thiermann said he waited outside the elementary school where Johnson's son was attending for three days with a

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video camera before finally catching up with the pop star, who readily agreed to help him out.

Next month, Thiermann, whose work has appeared in Surfer Magazine and the Huffington Post, among other publications, will accept the 2011 Surfrider Achievement Award in Hawaii. The California-based nonprofit foundation works for beach preservation and water quality.

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“Every day, you bank and you shop and you use plastic,” he told the BC students who attended his talk Wednesday night. “I truly believe that you have the power to change your community and you have the power to change the world and this change starts by following what you love to do.”

Kevin Morris, a Bridgewater College freshman, said he was glad to see a professional athlete following his passion in a positive fashion.

“I’m a soccer player so I think he’s representing athletes well, because there’s a stereotype that athletes don’t care [about anything],” Morris said. “I like how he’s environmentally friendly.”

Bethany Redman, a BC sophomore and surfing enthusiast, said she was also impressed and inspired by Thiermann’s strong personal connections to those in the industry.

“When he told me he interviewed [professional surfer] Kelly Slater, last week, I gasped,” she said.

Randy Young, director of convocations and associate professor of psychology, organized Wednesday’s program. He said Thiermann’s message clearly resonated with the students.

“You’ve got someone who’s young, who’s changing the world,” Young said.

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