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Wider Than a Mile: One River Two Women

Mimi Hughes

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Extended Description The cold, the fear, the pain is irrelevant. For the next eighty-nine days everything must be about moving forward. Swimming is my job, every day, seven days a week, without end. The number of days left cannot be counted like an advent calendar or one of those strings of paper rings we used as children to count the days left until summer vacation. Conscious awareness of the task ahead will only serve to chip away my resolve. Staying in the moment is not an option but essential for enduring. One stroke at a time; that's the mentality that will get me to the Black Sea. How far would you go to enact true social change? For Mimi Hughes, it was over 1,770 miles down the Danube River. Her incredible journey as the first person to swim the river, without propulsion of flippers, is chronicled in her captivating memoir, Wider Than a Mile. Swimming twenty miles a day for eighty-nine days through nine European countries, perhaps the most amazing part of Hughes's saga is that the swim becomes secondary in a tale full of love, loss, and the power of human kindness. Hughes, a fifty-year-old married mother of four, embarks on this seemingly outrageous adventure to prove that a strong desire for change, expressed through major athletic accomplishments, can help motivate others to become more socially and environmentally aware. Joined only by her nineteen-year-old daughter on kayak, Hughes makes her way through foreign lands aided by countless strangers who were inspired to help beyond the team's wildest expectations. When they stop swimming at night, Hughes and her daughter never know if they will find shelter or food, or be offered a place to stay. Some nights they are forced to hide the kayak in the woods and sleep there, but many more nights they are graciously offered a place to stay with the locals. As thousands of people join them at the river to become part of the swim, Hughes and her daughter are given food and rest from people whose language they cannot speak, while countries still bitter over recent wars work together to ensure the women's safety. Help comes in the most unexpected of places, from locals to well-established organizations. Rotary International offers an assistant in almost every port from Germany through Austria, while World Wildlife Fund employees navigate the media in the Balkan States. Slovakian whitewater kayakers guide Hughes and her daughter through flood waters, while Hungarian river police and attorneys fight for Hughes's right to swim when authorities pull her from the river. These people and countless others help make the long journey a successful one, but it is not without its dangers. The pair's emotional fortitude is tested multiple times, perhaps most significantly when Serbian artist Najdan drowns tragically while attempting to swim with Hughes to the Iron Gate Dam. Despite losing one of their most famous national artists, the Serbian people come together to provide the Hughes women the support they need to keep forging on to complete their mission. As Hughes faces floods, radiation-polluted waters, bureaucratic entanglement, fatigue, and countless other hardships, her perseverance inspires those around her even as those she meets inspire her. After all, "Being an inspiration isn't about being certain or confident," says Hughes. "It's about taking a chance, about being vulnerable and approachable, and believing people will come forth and help you triumph over obstacles that cannot be anticipated." Ultimately, Wider Than a Mile is a story of hope, as well as an examination of how fear is the only thing keeping us from changing the world.

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