

Hi!

I'm Sandy. Sandy by name and by nature. As anyone who knows me well, will tell you, anywhere I go I seem to leave a trail of sand! Aka Alexandra Ciccognani and one of the founders of Swim The Wight.

I am an STA qualified Open Water Swimming Coach and Tube Rescuer. I swim daily and will be going into my forth winter of open water swimming. I have swum the Solent and completed the Sandown to Shanklin Pier to Pier swim and will be repeating both of these this year.

I don't remember a time when I was not swimming or wanting to swim. As children, we were always travelling and often spent weeks on end by the sea or in a hotel pool. My father would go off spear fishing and I remember him teaching us to empty our lungs as fully as possible before taking a breath and seeing how far we could swim under water. I learnt from an early age that the trick was to swim slowly and relax, although I don't remember anyone using that word.

When I was just seven, my younger brother died in an accident while we were on holiday in Mauritius. In fact he drowned in the hotel pool. Our family never really recovered from that shock and I certainly spent many years coming to terms with what had happened as there was no therapy or grief counselling offered back then, certainly not for siblings.

If anything, this meant that we were encouraged to learn to be better swimmers. In London, we went for swimming lessons at the local pool, always working towards the next certificate or badge. Then came school galas, personal survival challenges that involved wearing pyjamas and doing straddle jumps over and over again, trying to enter the water without your face getting in the water! I never did quite master that one.

As a young adult, swimming was something I would only ever do whilst on holiday. I hated the stink of chlorine and memories of verruca baths and hairy showers were quite strong from school days, so I avoided public pools as much as possible. Many of the older pools were closing down or under threat, most lidos were out of use and I lived far from any open water.

I have what is politely known as a portfolio career. Those who like to be blunt may say I am something of a butterfly, flitting from one thing to another. In my own mind, however there are definite links and exciting crossovers between all the elements of work that I do. Originally I studied Psychology and then Communications in Computing. I spent many years in London working with children with special needs and their families; teaching English as a second language and literacy skills. I moved to the Isle of Wight in 1998 with my two small children got into community film making. I have continued to work in the voluntary sector and more recently in Health Research. I am currently working on a project about loneliness with Southampton University.

Within two years of moving to the Isle of Wight I became a single parent on benefits with two young children. This was not an easy time, I had a reactive period of depression and I remember clearly how difficult even the simplest of things could be. In retrospect, I wish I had had the courage to swim during this period, but I had no one to spur me on.

In 2018 I started up a Facebook group called Outdoor Swimming Isle of Wight in the hope of meeting a few other people who might like to swim with me in the sea. Within days about 50 people had joined, many of whom were already friends and I had no idea they also liked to swim!! Three years on this group has grown to well over 1000 members.

We set up Swim The Wight during 2020 and now I find myself wanting to share the swim love with everyone I meet.