

ELI MACK WAS FEATURED IN THE DOCUMENTARY *KEEP SURFING*, BJÖRN RICHIE LOB'S 10-YEAR-IN-THE-MAKING, AWARD-WINNING FILM ON RIVER SURFING.



SAVED BY HIS PASSION FOR WAVES, A PORTLAND-BASED DAD-OF-FOUR REFLECTS ON HOMELESSNESS, BRAWLING, BARBERING—AND LIFE AS A RIVER-SURFING PIONEER.

BY MEGAN MICHELSON

**WEARING A WETSUIT AND A HELMET,** Elijah Mack is riding a glassy emerald wave on British Columbia's Skookumchuck Narrows, a roaring tidal river on Canada's Sunshine Coast. Surrounded by whitewater kayakers, Mack stands out. He's on an ocean surfboard. He's got short, bleach-blond hair and is plastered with tattoos. What really makes Mack different, however, are the experiences you can't see—the turbulence he's endured to get to this oddly peaceful moment, standing still on a wave amidst a raging river.

River surfing has become a rapidly growing sport, with hubs everywhere from Munich, Germany, to Missoula, Montana, but in the late 1990s, when Mack first discovered river surfing on a creek in Chico, California, few were taking surfboards to the river. Two years later, he had an epiphany while surfing a canal in Arizona. "I realized there were these big, perfect waves for surfing in places you wouldn't expect."

He spent years scouting the ideal river waves, travelling to Africa's Zambezi River, Munich and all over North America. He soon founded the World River Surfing Association. "Elijah is legitimately a pioneer in this sport,"

says Neil Egsgard, president of the Alberta River Surfing Association and founder of the Surf Anywhere Project. "He travelled around the world to surf waves, connecting all the various communities and showing people what you can do on river waves by surfing them when nobody else was."



ROCKING SOCKS RIVER SURFERS DO IT DIFFERENTLY.

Raised in the San Diego area, Mack started riding waves in the ocean at an early age with his two great-uncles, Mickey and Dempsey Holder, who were pioneering big-wave surfers. By 17, his home life became violent and he was

kicked out. He lived on the streets for a stretch, getting into trouble with the law for assaults and public drunkenness. "I don't shy away from controversy and I've never shied away from a fist fight," he says.

Through his 20s and 30s, life got grittier. He was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, was institutionalized for being suicidal, and eventually found his way to Eugene, Oregon, where he ended up homeless. That is when he decided to paddle back to shore.

Mack attended beauty school and got his first job as a barber while living at a men's shelter in Eugene. In 2003, he opened his own barbershop, which he ran for five years. He married and had four boys with names like Hurricane and Chance. Now 44 and living in Portland, Oregon, Mack says life is good for him: he teaches travelling barber seminars, is off antidepressants and is still an avid river surfer. "River surfing has taken me on the road, figuratively and literally," Mack says. "And when you search for the perfect wave, you also search for something deeper inside you. I think I've found what I was looking for."