

LIFESTYLE

RIVER FALLS



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In 2016 Claire VanValkenburg founded Mermaid Echo Entertainment LLC, the first of its kind in the Midwest to offer event bookings for mermaids.

A MERMAID'S TALE

River Falls woman dives into mermaiding in Wisconsin

BY SAM FRISTED
Staff Writer

RIVER FALLS – When people think of things to do in western Wisconsin, mermaiding is not at the top of most lists. Mermaiding as a hobby is rare; doing it as a profession is unheard of.

Echo the Mermaid is the exception, holding the honor of being one of the state's only certified professional mermaid.

On land she is known as Claire Van Valkenburg, but in the water she is known as Echo. It was 10 years ago when Van Valkenburg first got involved with mermaiding at age 14 when she was recovering from an ankle surgery.

"As part of the recovery for surgery I had to have pool therapy," Van Valkenburg said. "I had to swim laps with a monofin to strengthen my ankle muscles so it would heal quicker."

Van Valkenburg said over the months she enjoyed swimming with the monofin and continued to swim with one after her ankle healed. She enjoyed it so much she began to research monofins and mermaid tails.

"I found this website called 'Mer-network' which is like a Facebook for mermaids," Van Valkenburg said.

Within the small community the website advocates for freshwater biology and conservation charities, something Van Valkenburg always wanted to do. Soon she became hooked on the lifestyle and advocacy of being a mermaid.

Within two years she bought her first mermaid tail and admitted she got pushback for the purchase.

"My parents were like, 'Why the hell are you spending your money on a mermaid tail? You should be saving for college,'" Van Valkenburg said.

Van Valkenburg did go to college, attending the University of Wisconsin Madison majoring in journalism. After graduation, she returned to western Wisconsin and continued mermaiding. Before leaving for Madison she started a business in 2016, Mermaid Echo Entertainment, the first of its kind in the Midwest to offer event bookings



SAM FRISTED/STAR-OBSERVER

Claire VanValkenburg and her mermaid tail.

for mermaids.

"The amount of times I had someone hang up on me after I pitched the business to them is too high to count," Van Valkenburg said, recounting the struggles it took to get the business running.

Van Valkenburg pushed through the adversity, saying it gave her thick skin to continue her business. A year later, in 2017, she launched Mermaid Scholar School, Wisconsin's first mermaid training program, with a friend.

The process for Van Valkenburg to become a certified mermaid instructor was long. Van Valkenburg worked with St. Croix Scuba in Hudson to become certified by the Professional Association of Diving Instructors. To teach classes she had to become certified as a mermaid, a program that began only about a year and a half ago.

After months of training she became a mermaid certified diving instructor in July of 2021, the first in the Midwest to receive the honor. At the time of certification, she became the fifth certified mermaid in the western hemisphere.

"It wasn't a large community because it was new and more people have been certified since, but it shows how difficult it is to get PADI mermaid certified," Van Valkenburg said.

She cannot reveal the process to become a certified mermaid diving instructor because of

confidential information within the program. She added the program is competitive and prefers not to have the information available for aspiring mermaids.

Since she began mermaiding, Van Valkenburg has won many awards including competing in Miss Mermaid USA and winning the title of Miss Mermaid Wisconsin in 2021 and 2022. She uses her profession to advocate for various charities around the country and within the community. This includes charities promoting diversity, inequality and inclusion.

Wild Rivers Conservation charity in Osceola, Wisconsin, is her biggest charity and partnership. Last year, Van Valkenburg raised more than \$1,000 for the Wild Rivers Conservation.

Mermaiding has taken Van Valkenburg all around the country to compete in events and meet mermaid community members. She has traveled the world including one prestigious award in Ireland.

"When I was living in Ireland for a year I was named 'Ireland's first mermaid' which was really cool," Van Valkenburg said. "I became kind of

famous, and it led to endorsements, magazine photo shoots, sponsorships, social media marketing, you name it, I did it."

Her favorite part of mermaiding is the connections and friendships she has made during her journey. She said mermaiding brings people together from all backgrounds and allows for "unparalleled" connections to be made with people all over the world.

Van Valkenburg loved mermaids starting at a young age when she began reading mythical novels. From a young age, she enjoyed swimming, boating and being around water. She tells people as a joke she spent more time on a boat or in water than on land growing up.

Part of mermaid lore is the different personalities she has. Van Valkenburg said her mermaid persona is different from her human persona.

"Echo is bubbly, funny and outgoing," she said. "On land I'm more shy and timid."

Van Valkenburg said she got the name Echo from one of her favorite stories in Greek mythology. Echo was a mountain spirit who was cursed not



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Echo the Mermaid.

to speak. When she was allowed to speak she could only repeat the last sentence said to her, echoing back words.

Van Valkenburg said the mermaid community is continuing to grow. She said they are entering the "golden age of mermaiding". She said she believes the community is growing because of a few factors. One factor is the history behind mermaids.

"They have always been around and fascinated people. I think people want to learn more about them," she said. "We are starting to get that exposure within the last five years."

Van Valkenburg said other factors include a rebirth in popular culture and fantasy. Advancements in aquatic technology have helped lead the movement, Van Valkenburg said.

While beginners can start the hobby for cheap, professionals sink large amounts of money into their craft. Van Valkenburg said she owns various tails that cost hundreds of dollars but her most expensive tail is \$3,000 which she uses for pageants and photo shoots. She said knows people within the industry with tails that cost more than \$10,000.

"It's a hobby where it's cheap for beginners but expensive for professionals," she said.

Currently there are more opportunities for people to pursue mermaiding than ever before,

Van Valkenburg said. The process to begin mermaiding is easy, she said.

"You call St. Croix Scuba and enroll in the next available class. It's that simple," Van Valkenburg said.

The next available class is on April 24 at the Hudson Middle School. Van Valkenburg said the class is for all ages and more information can be found online and through Facebook. The class is offered once a month.

"I've taught people as young as 8 and as old as 65 to be a mermaid," Van Valkenburg said.

The biggest benefit of attending the class is the workout and exercise it provides. Van Valkenburg said the class benefits those who are adventurous, hard working and open minded.

Van Valkenburg said she doesn't know where mermaiding will take her in the future. She has local events scheduled and trips around the country booked but doesn't know how long it will last.

Right now she is enjoying the moment and feels positive about the outlook. She enjoys the job and says she is not looking too far into the future.

"It's fun, silly and a good time," she said. "If you come in with those qualities, you will have fun and who knows, you might just want to continue mermaiding in the future."

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