

Author's Note for *Make a Little Wave*

By Kerry O'Malley Cerra

A cool string of life events led me to write this book, and looking back on them now, I'm in awe of how these things happen. How ideas take shape. How a cause can grab hold of someone and not loosen its grip until they've done their best to help in some way. For me, that's through writing.

I suppose it all began with my high school job at SeaWorld. I loved every minute of it, and when I had kids of my own, we frequently took them there. My oldest, Kylie, was enamored. While I, like many people, spent many years figuring out what I wanted to be when I grew up, Kylie knew from the time she was three: a marine biologist.

Kylie has had an incredible mentor in marine science teacher Jodi Burchfield. It was Jodi who showed Kylie the documentary *Blackfish*—a controversial film about orcas in captivity at SeaWorld—when Kylie was in high school. The film sparked many difficult questions for us. Was this place we grew up loving actually detrimental to some of the animals it housed? I knew that to a large extent, zoos and parks like SeaWorld rehabilitate wounded animals and return them to the wild when possible. But did they also hold animals for “show” when those animals could've been set free? Both Kylie and I had swum with dolphins in captivity. Suddenly, to us, it felt wrong.

When Kylie was majoring in marine science at the University of South Florida, a professor introduced her to another influential documentary: *Sharkwater* by the late Canadian filmmaker, photographer, and conservationist Rob Stewart. Partly because of this film, Kylie chose to focus her life's work on sharks. Much as Sav introduces her parents to the fictional *Shark Matters* documentary in my novel, Kylie showed me *Sharkwater*. The visceral reaction I had is indescribable, but it was definitely a turning point in how I viewed sharks and came to care about their place in our oceans. The more I learned, the more I couldn't ignore the issue.

Throughout college, Kylie held several shark-centric internships around the globe. I had the opportunity to visit her at the Bimini Biological Field Station (Bimini Shark Lab) in the Bahamas, where she and her team took me on a cage-free dive with Caribbean reef sharks. It's strange, as a writer, to feel a loss for words, but there are none that adequately describe that first dive encounter. Mesmerizing. Insightful. Peaceful. Freeing! None of those feel quite right, but they're all I've got.

Since then, I've joined Kylie on as many dives as possible, with as many different shark species as possible. (As of this writing, I'm up to five species.) Highlights include swimming with whale sharks in Mexico and lemon sharks off of Jupiter, Florida. The lemons have been my favorite so far because they're actually playful. These incredible dives have also educated me on the positive impact that shark tourism—as opposed to shark *fishing*—can have on our economy. Thanks to Ryan Walton of Shark Tours Florida, I've learned just how profitable shark swimming excursions can be. Of course, it's imperative that these are done safely and with experts on hand.

Along the way, we met marine biologist Guy Harvey, who introduced us to Stefanie Brendl of Shark Allies. Stefanie's knowledge is enlightening and her passion unmatched. It was an awakening to watch as she helped move the Florida legislature to pass the Kristen Jacobs Ocean Conservation Act in 2020. This law limits the sale, import, and export of shark fins, much like the fictional bills Sav supports in my novel.

As passionate as I am about sharks, I'm equally dedicated to writing and advocating for diverse, authentic representation of characters with hearing loss. Readers will note that Sav is deaf and has cochlear implants, like me. She's also what I like to call an accidental activist. She doesn't enjoy attention, but she's driven to step outside of her comfort zone and speak out.

Of course, Sav and the novel's other characters are fictional, but because of real-life activists and grassroots organizations, change does happen! In 2022, President Joe Biden signed the James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act of 2023, which, in part, makes the possession, sale, and trade of shark fins illegal (with a few exceptions) throughout the United States. The law is intended to reduce the overfishing of sharks and protect against wasteful fishing that's propelled by the global shark fin trade.

I hope Sav's journey will encourage readers to channel their passions into advocating for causes that matter to them. After the tragic 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in my own neighborhood, I watched the teens in our community stand up, speak up, and encourage an entire nation to rise up. I'm proud of those who've led the #neveragain and #marchforourlives movements. But I've also been moved by the students who aren't necessarily comfortable stepping into the spotlight yet work staunchly behind the scenes to effect change. Those who've marched, written, contacted their legislators, and organized for student safety have contributed just as much as those who've become public figures. They were my inspiration for Sav's activism in this story.