

PADDLING

as a family

BY JESSICA SIBLEY
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SALEM — It was time for John Thomas and his family to slow things down.

Between two working parents, sports obligations for his daughter and an overall inability to come to a consensus on how to spend a relaxing weekend, the Thomas' were quickly falling victim to family disconnect.

"My wife doesn't do well in the heat and sun, not to mention, she feels like she has terrible balance," John said. "My daughter is 8-years old and our options for adventure were somewhat limited. That's when I decided on trying kayaking. Smart move, right? Combining the three things that my wife isn't a huge fan of. I'm pretty sure that suggestion got me nominated for husband of the year."

'It was the first time since Gracie was born that I could just look around at all the beautiful scenery and be totally at peace. Then, to be able to look to my left and see my husband and daughter, well, that was just awesome.'

Kelly Thomas

So, when John approached his wife, Kelly, about possibly taking lessons with their daughter, Gracie, he was ready for a quick letdown.

"But, we had been talking about doing more as a family, so she was really open to the idea," he said. "I promised that if any of us felt uncomfortable or unhappy during the lessons that we wouldn't push it any further. We'd drop it."

So, the threesome signed up for an introductory course on Lake Jocassee in March. Gracie was a natural, which didn't surprise dear old dad, who is admittedly her No. 1 fan on the sidelines.

"She was a natural swimmer and athlete from early on," he added. "Which is great for me because I always wanted to be a sports and adventure kind of dad."

When it came to Kelly, it was obvious that she didn't feel

100 percent comfortable in the kayak, but was determined to not give up.

"It is just so important for families to stick together and do these kinds of things," Kelly said. "I was really terrified, I know that sounds crazy, but I was."

Within the hour, Kelly's fear was long gone and under the shade from the brim of her hat, a smile exuded from her lips in the glistening sun.

"It was the first time since Gracie was born that I could just look around at all the beautiful scenery and be totally at peace," Kelly added. "Then, to be able to look to my left and see my husband and daughter, well, that was just awesome."

Needless to say, the Thomas fam-

ily agreed that learning to kayak was a fantastic choice, and with so many places nearby to do it, John said it's been a money saver and a true bonding bonus.

"Sure, kayaking can't really be done by people who are physically unable, but for the most part, it isn't age limited," John added. "And when it comes to learning how, there are local classes and great information on buying the right boat for you. We found it far from intimidating while getting started."

Gracie, who likes to brag about her 8-foot sit-on-top kayak, looks forward to 'lake days' with her folks.

"We'll go a lot after I'm done with school," she said. "Even if it's

for an hour or so, I love it. We see so many cool things in the woods while we're on the water. I'm really glad that my dad got us into it."

For John, the journey of finding the perfect family activity and making a habit out of it has ended with the best possible scenario.

"We are always safe on the water and wear life jackets and carry emergency whistles," he added. "We douse ourselves with sun block and wear hats, but getting out in the sunshine and fresh air really does wonders. After we're done with a trip, long or short, we are always in a great mood. It's been great for our family and it can be great for yours, too."

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Kelly, left, and 8-year old Gracie cruise Lake Jocassee last month with the man of the house, husband and father, John Thomas.

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John and Gracie get ready to load their kayaking gear for a day out on the water.

