

Swimming ‘Upstream’ With U.S. Paralympian Jessica Long

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For U.S. Paralympian and Team Toyota athlete Jessica Long, the water is not just the place where she competes. It is also the place where she finds peace. And now, the journey towards finding that private, healing place is to be shared with the world.

Long, a double amputee since infancy, is a four-time Paralympian in swimming and, with 23 medals, the second-most decorated U.S. Paralympian in history. She was adopted into a large, loving American family, all but sight-unseen, from a Russian orphanage at thirteen months, her disability no barrier for her future parents. This Sunday, during the Big Game and in partnership with Toyota, she'll find the spotlight again, this time in a dramatized version of her adoption and road to swimming success, in a commercial all her own, titled “Upstream.”

“Every day, I walk with two heavy prosthetics. I may be a Paralympic athlete, but that doesn't take away the fact that walking is hard,” says Long, 28. “The water has always given me so much freedom. Since I was a little girl, the water has been this place in my life where I just didn't feel the weight.”

“Upstream”

As if to mirror this sense of freedom given to Long when she swims, glides or even just floats, “Upstream” was filmed entirely in water. If the spot only featured Long swimming, that fact would not point to the feat that *was* pulled off. Scenes of the adoption, Long’s family home, and even a sassy 10-year-old Jessica snapping on her goggles in a locker room all take place with water as the foundation.

The 60-second condensed biopic is also a triumph of storytelling. “It’s everything,” Long says of “Upstream.” “It’s everything I swam for, everything I’ve worked really hard for. My biggest hope is that young people see me, a girl without legs in the Paralympics, on TV, and think, ‘I can do that too.’”

It’s impossible to separate Long’s story from the inspiring person and athlete she’s grown into. Long was born with fibular hemimelia, a rare condition where the fibulas, ankles, heels and most of the bones in her feet are missing. Adopted by Steven and Beth Long as a baby, along with Long’s adoptive brother, Joshua, from the same Russian orphanage, Long grew up in a family of eight in Baltimore, Maryland. She has undergone over 25 surgeries, the first of which was at 18 months old to amputate her legs below the knees in order to fit her with prosthetics.



Long is open about the challenges she’s faced. “I have an amazing family, and my parents did everything right,” she says. “But how could I not feel like a burden? There was still a lot of hurt there: Why was I adopted? Why me? Why didn’t I have legs? There’s still a lot of heartache, but as I’ve gotten older, I’ve really tried to reframe that ‘why me’ into ‘why not me?’”

“Upstream” serves as a kind of inflection point for Long. “I think ‘Upstream’ showcases my life in this whole

new way, and it's so personal and beautiful," she says. "It pulls up all of these emotions of just being a little girl, adopted from Russia, wondering if I was ever going to amount to anything. It feels amazing to share my story."

This is Your Life

The spot follows Long's compelling progression towards the Paralympic Games. Each scene depicts Long swimming through memories from key moments in her life, witnessing her younger selves to a voiceover of an actress portraying her mother on the phone with the adoption agency. In one scene, Long is a baby in the orphanage. In another, she's joining her first swim team at age 10. There's also a rendition of the moment Long's parents receive the news that their future daughter has a mobility challenge. The line spoken by the character of Long's mother encapsulates the real Jessica's journey, and could by extension speak for all Paralympic athletes: "It might not be easy, but it'll be amazing."

"When I filmed that scene where I swim up to the edge and turn around to look at my mom and dad, I put myself there, back to that time," says Long. "Those emotions and that smile were completely real. At moments, I was tearing up in my goggles right on set."



While filming, Long spent time with the young actresses who played her, including the baby in the orphanage. After talking to the baby's mother, Long discovered the girl is half Russian.

"Here I am holding this little baby that's going to play me in the orphanage and she's half Russian, and she looks like me," she says. "It brought me back to that moment where my dad first went to Russia and what that must have been like for my parents."

A Family Story

According to Long, the filming process sparked new conversations with her parents, diving into emotional waters she'd often avoided growing up, discovering new details of her story along the way.

“We didn’t talk about the adoption process that much, because it was almost scary to ask,” she says. “But filming brought up some really beautiful and emotional conversations. I found out my mom had been the one to see that first picture of me and got the phone call from the adoption agency.”



Previously, Long assumed her father, Steven, had been the one to see her first picture; it had been his idea to adopt, and he was the one who traveled to Russia to pick up Long and her brother. Long recalls her parents’ love as she endured multiple rounds of surgery. Before each operation, one parent accompanied her into the operating room, holding her hand until she was ready to let go.

Joining her first swim team at age 10 was perhaps the crucial turning point in her life, a moment that’s also captured in “Upstream.” The young swimmer looks at herself in the locker room mirror, knowing that everyone would see her without prosthetics. Long says it was one of the first times she knew she could be strong and brave.

“Watching ‘Upstream’ helped me realize that everything was always going to be okay,” she says. “There was always a plan. It takes me back to those moments of doubt. But now I can say, ‘This is why. You were always going to be able to share your story and inspire people on a whole different level.’”

Coming Full Circle

While Long is grateful for the personal experience of filming “Upstream,” she’s especially thankful to Toyota for the opportunity to highlight the Paralympics in such a big way.

“I kind of want to pinch myself like, ‘Jess, you did it,’” she says. “I made it. Everything I’ve fought for, everything I’ve believed in, Toyota is going to showcase it on this insane, amazing platform.”

And while Long knew the storyline of the commercial, seeing “Upstream” in full was a powerful experience. She’s most excited for her parents to watch the spot when it’s officially debuted as well as when it airs during the Big Game. Even though she won’t be there in person when her family sees it for the first time since she’s currently training at the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Long is hopeful that she’ll be able to join them virtually for the special moment.



“I don’t think it’s really hit them yet,” she says. “I’ve talked about it and got emotional telling them about scenes. It’s tough that I won’t be with them during the game, but I’m excited to call and hear their reactions. I know they’re going to be so excited.”

For Long, watching her entire story compressed into a short spot feels as though something is coming full circle. She remembers her father picking her up from swim practices and how they used to talk about her breaking a world record someday.

“When ‘Upstream’ debuts, it’s going to feel like a ‘we did it’ kind of thing,” she says. “It may be my story, but it never would have been possible without my mom and dad and their selflessness. When my parents adopted me, they went into it completely full of faith and full of love, and I think that’s something that really comes

through in this commercial.”