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FROM NOVICE TO EXPERT IN NO TIME

How do you go from being a complete novice in a kayak to rescuing some of Australasia's top canoeists – all in the space of a year?

By doing the Advanced Certificate in Leadership and Guiding at Tai Poutini Polytechnic!

Although she has been an outdoor enthusiast all her life, Amy Tipling didn't learn to kayak until she moved south from Taranaki early last year to study at Tai Poutini Polytechnic (TPP) in Greymouth. But she must be a fast learner, because the 19 year-old spent Easter Sunday rescuing competitors at the New Zealand Canoe Slalom National Championships held on the Roaring Meg rapid on the Kawarau River near Cromwell.

"It was an awesome experience being part of the Nationals, doing rescues. We were really needed!"

The safety team, which included Tipling and four of her classmates, was kept busy after heavy rain overnight dramatically increased water levels, creating unpredictable waves and surges which tested the skills of many of the competitors, particularly those from across the Tasman, who were used to more sedate flows.

"We rescued a lot of Aussies when the water went up!"

While it was "full on", with "heaps of rescues", Tipling says the rescue skills she had learnt on the programme – and the fact she and her classmates had spent the previous week kayaking on the Kawarau River as part of their course – meant she had complete confidence in her kayaking and boat-based-rescue abilities; a sentiment the organisers wholeheartedly shared.

"Having such a solid group of safety kayakers at the Meg created the degree of security required to enable the Nationals to run smoothly," said event organiser Gordon Rayner.

"The safety team were fantastic young people and are a real credit to TPP."

Dave Ritchie, Tai Poutini Polytechnic's Programme Co-ordinator – Leadership and Guiding, describes the Roaring Meg as “a very powerful piece of water” at the best of times, but with so much rain falling the previous night, he says “there was all kinds of carnage” on the Sunday.

“The safety crew never dreamt they'd have to make so many rescues. It was a great experience!”

While some of the students, like Tipling, arrive as kayaking novices, Dave says the second year Advanced Certificate in Leadership and Guiding programme gets them up to speed very quickly.

“They paddle a lot, so they get good very quickly. It's a high intensity course.”

Ritchie says TPP students get called on frequently to provide safety for outdoor events, such as the Coast to Coast (river section) and the recent Methven Triathlon. “And we actively look for events like these to give the students experience with event safety.”

While it's difficult for kayakers to make a living solely from this kind of work, some high-paying jobs do come up from time to time in the film and television industry, says Ritchie, on shows like Survivor and Eco Challenge.

“Plus these skills are very transferrable. Most of the jobs the students will end up doing will involve looking after clients and keeping them safe.”

Following the adrenalin rush of the Nationals, Tipling stayed on in Queenstown for five days of workplace experience with Queenstown Rafting.

“It was a great chance for us to see what working for a rafting company is like. They looked after us really well and we learnt a lot.”

While Tipling's not certain where she'll end up working when the course finishes in October, she is sure about one thing. That she'll put ‘safety crew for the New Zealand Canoe Slalom National Championships’ on her CV!

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About Tai Poutini Polytechnic:

Tai Poutini Polytechnic (TPP) offers a range of exciting programmes including outdoor education, ski patrol, ecotourism, jade and hard stone carving, professional chef and civil construction. Tai Poutini Polytechnic has campuses in Auckland, Matamata, Christchurch, Wanaka, Invercargill, Westport, Greymouth, Reefton and Hokitika.