

## WI Meeting 9 March 2023

### Report of the talk given by Dr Gillian Mara: Atlantic the Wrong Way (based on the Zoom recording )

In 2016 Dr Gilly Mara was given the opportunity to row across the Atlantic in an ocean rowing boat with four other women after the skipper of that crew asked her "What are you doing next summer?".

Gilly's background is as a kayak athlete. She started off in white water and competing internationally. She was aiming to compete in the International Canoe Marathon from Devizes to Westminster which is 125 miles long, and wanted to beat the female record to achieve that distance in a non-stop time, which is around 18 hours 30 minutes. Gilly felt that she and her crew member could do this non-stop. There are hundreds of crews who do this every year.

Gilly then asked the skipper of the crew what she was planning to do next summer and was told she was intending to row across the Atlantic in two hour shifts: two hours on, two hours on the oars, two hours off, two hours on, non-stop, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. She wanted to try and break the record, which currently sits at 45 days. No female crew has ever done this as it has always been done by men.

Gilly reminded those present at the WI meeting that she is a kayaker, who sits in a boat facing forwards using a paddle with two blades. Rowers sit facing the opposite direction to which they paddle and they have a boat oar which has only one blade. At that point, Gilly had never done rowing before. The skipper said that she was trying to find some athletes to take part in this venture. Gilly knew that the skipper was an Olympic silver medallist from Sydney and thought that she must know lots of rowers. The skipper said that they were too slow – she had been doing trials and found they can only go 2000 metres but cannot keep going for longer distances.

Rowers always talk about how fast they go and the stroke rate which they do it. On a Concept 2 Rowing Machine, the skipper said that she wanted them to keep between 22-24 strokes per minute. Gilly said that she had sat on a rowing machine before and achieved about 20 strokes per minute and took 2 minutes 8 seconds to do 500 metres. Gilly thought that surely these Olympic rowers could do that. The skipper then asked Gilly if she was interested in taking part in this event. Understandably, Gilly wanted to know some more and the skipper said she would send some information. To someone who is curious and utterly impatient when someone 'dangles a carrot' she was desperate to find out what this would involve. Gilly was invited to meet some of the crew and to take part in a weekend selection camp where she had to do lots of different mental and physical activities to test her resilience. It was based on an SAS type event – carrying large tractor tyres, doing burpees, working on the rowing machine and doing things non-stop for six hours. Gilly thought it was amazing going against some Olympians and thinking she might beat them. At the end of the weekend, Gilly was told she was in the crew. This was at the end of January 2016.

Gilly has her 'athlete life' and also her professional 'work life'. She was working for Jaguar Landrover at that time and had just been promoted to be a manager. Suddenly the realisation of what she had agreed to do hit her – she was going to cross the Atlantic. Gilly gets seasick, does not like the taste of salt water and is scared of jelly fish – that is why she does not go in the sea! It hit her that this was going to happen in June and she had about 4½ months to prepare.

At the beginning of June 2016, she was due to go to New York to prepare. The plan was to row from New York to Falmouth in the UK. There would be five people on the boat, which was 8 metres in length and a maximum of 1.2 metres at its widest point. It was not very big nor comfortable. Most of the time you would be sitting as there was nowhere to stand. Gilly began to question why she had said yes to this.

Most people if asked to cross the Atlantic by human power would say no. Gilly said, "Why not?" – it is about the experience. This could potentially be the first female team to row cross the Atlantic – how cool was that? Turning away from technology and phones and the day to day bustle of life - how many places in the world can you do that? Not many. She considered whether she would regret not doing it.

*Facts about going to go from New York to Falmouth:*

There are three different ocean currents to get across  
3000+ nautical miles  
Along major shipping lanes  
In an 8m rowing boat  
5 women and no support boat

They had to take everything they would need in the boat – even creating their own water from sea water using an onboard de-salination unit.

*Other facts:*

4000+ people have climbed Mount Everest successfully.

600 people have crossed an ocean in a rowing boat – most on the southern route

65 people have crossed the North Atlantic

There is a 38% success rate –the others have failed or died trying

Why did Gilly say “Yes”? When she was 20 years old, in 2002, she had a life changing experience. If that event had not occurred, she probably would have said the prospect of doing this adventure would be ridiculous. Gilly had fallen 200ft off a mountain– she had fallen 60ft straight down and then the remaining 140ft tumbling and bouncing. The way she had made decisions and the order they were in on that day meant she and her friend had got lost when they were walking...and then she fell. She spent a night out on the mountain with very serious injuries. She had fractured her pelvis in four places; dislocated her lower spine; dislocated and fractured her neck; had lacerations to her skull and to her shin right through to the bone. She was not in a great way and the injury she sustained to her neck narrowed her spinal cord until it was almost completely severed.

It took Gilly a long time to recover from the accident and she had a major operation to straighten out her spine. Before she went into the surgery, having survived falling off the mountain, which the majority of people would not have survived, she was told she had a 50% chance she was not going to survive the operation, 80% chance she would be quadriplegic, 90% chance she could have no feeling in her legs and 10% chance that she would be absolutely fine. Fortunately, after a lot of rehabilitation she managed to get full feeling back and had to learn how to walk. Gilly did not want to just walk, she wanted to run again.

At that point, something turned in her brain that made her realise she had to really want something to make herself achieve. To do things she had to break it down into lots of different stages. Although she had a lot of positive energy when she was in hospital, she sometimes found herself asking “What is the point?”.

A volunteer came into the hospital - Gilly was quite angry at this point - who said to her “You have to *want* to get better”. Gilly said, “Have you any idea of what I have been through?” The volunteer said nothing and walked out of the room. Gilly mulled things over and reflected on the people telling her she would not be able to walk or do other things and she decided she was going to fight this. It was at this point that her life really changed and that is why she said, “Why not?” as she had been faced with so many barriers. Whether it is physical or mental challenge, she likes to find a way round it. This is why she is an engineer as she likes to find a solution.

The accident happened in 2002 and it took her three years to be able to compete internationally as a kayaker and find a way that she could still be an athlete. She wanted to be the best in the world. It took her almost ten years to figure out how to be the best athlete she could be and to work with her body as it is.

Outwardly Gilly looks like anyone else and it is not obvious she has had a spinal injury, but as she gets tired, she says her right hand side begins to drag and that you will typically see a scuff on her shoes on her right toe. She has to think about moving her right leg as she gets tired. Gilly has to alter what she does in her daily routine and how she works and operates, but she finds a way. She has had lots of ups and downs including 3 mini-strokes. After the fall there have been lots of after-effects as her brain was quite damaged, having bounced for 140 ft. It takes time to overcome these, and incidences have occurred at various points over the last 20 years.

When she looks back to that moment in December 2015 when she was asked “What are you doing next summer?” and she considered it sounded interesting, and felt it gives her a bit of an incentive to say “Why not?” – She nearly lost her life but chose to live, so now takes the opportunity to go with every option and have no regrets - that is what drives her.

The adventure started on 7 June 2016 when the crew set off from the Statue of Liberty with a flotilla of boats. At midday a hooter went off. They had a number of sayings on the boat, namely, “Be positive, be responsible and be punctual”. Beforehand, they had considered all the things that could go wrong and how they would deal with it. What would be their attitude day in and day out? In such a small environment, how would they live and not get annoyed with other crew members as they were literally living on top of one

another? They were literally sleeping on top of food for the first few weeks as they could not pack it all in. It was an incredibly amazing experience but it was also the most traumatic experience and the hardest thing Gilly has ever done – but also the most awesome. On one of the days Gilly recalled that she saw the Northern Lights and could also see the curvature of the Earth. On other days, it was like a mill pond, which you would not expect to see in the middle of the ocean – literally no waves.

As they left New York they went past Long Island, which is quite a treacherous piece of water because it is so warm on the land you end up with a misty fog on the water. It looked like someone was shining a light on the boat, whilst all around it was fog. It was an orange coloured fog as the lights from Long Island beamed but they could not see it nor hear it. It was just an eerily orange glow and that lasted for about a week and a half and everything was wet and damp.

Gilly was in the bow cabin, which she described as rather like a coffin. She asked the WI members to imagine a small estate car with the seats down, with three people in it – coffin shaped where your feet go and you were laid there like sardines. If you laid there shoulder to shoulder, you could not all fit so someone had to turn on their side and then the other two could probably lay shoulder to shoulder. Fortunately, there were not too many occasions when there were three in that cabin. The other two crew members were in the aft cabin at the back of the boat - their feet went under where they rowed, and it was rather like a cubby hole. It looked small at first glance, as their feet disappeared underneath you. However, they could actually lay down shoulder to shoulder and turn over on their side whenever they liked, so Gilly thought this was quite luxurious!

There were a few times where they used a para anchor – a sea anchor rather like a parachute - which stops the boat from moving. The waves and the water fill up the parachute and hold the boat roughly in position. It is put out when the sea state is such that you cannot row against it or it could be too big for them. You could put it out because the currents you are rowing are going in the opposite direction harder than you can row against it and you go backwards, literally. Because of these tidal forces, they went into para anchor quite often and Gilly said that they could not row - you are just sitting there and you have to wait.

On days like that, when you are stuck in that position and when there are three of you in the cabin, it was really hard going and Gilly shed a few tears - the longest time they stopped was for 32 hours, it was a hot 40C+ and they were being bounced around. That was one of the unpleasant times and Gilly remembers listening to Christmas music – one of her friends had downloaded 20 hours of Christmas music! This was hardly entertaining when it was June.

They did make it across the Atlantic, coming into Falmouth on 27 July 2016, having spent 49 days at sea. She never loved seeing land so much in her life. She had promised her friends when she saw land she would send a text message.

It was tough going and there were certain points – on day 32 for example - where she questioned if she could still keep going like this. She had lived her life through setting goals – when she was told be happy if she could walk, she said she wanted to run. To be able to run you had to jog, to jog you need to be able to walk, to walk you needed to stand and to stand you needed a stick – and to do this you need to be able to get out of bed. All these stepping stones to get to something. At almost every point in her life, she had been driven by goals.

On the ocean it was not like that as you are not in control of the tide, the waves or the weather. You are only in control of what you dress in, the attitude you choose, how you control your emotions, what you eat. Gilly decided when she wanted to eat. On day 32 – thought she could not survive, as they were failing constantly and they were not making the time of 45 days. She felt she was rowing hard, but others did not have the speed and she wanted them to put in more effort. She tried to be enthusiastic and encourage them to do it. Three of the crew (including Gilly) rowed hard but the other two were slow and it bothered her that she could not control them.

On board, Gilly was really struggling with one of the other crew members, and she was not alone – it may have been how this person was dealing with the pressure. On the ocean, every day you were in charge of your own life. If you made one small mistake like not clipping on, you could get tossed overboard very quickly and you would be powerless in that situation. You cannot swim back if you are in big seas – you have to be very pragmatic in such situations as you are constantly dealing with potential risks to your life. The way this other crew member dealt with it was by being quite nasty to other people on the boat – she was not the skipper – but she wanted to be in charge. So, she tried to be in control of anything that she could, and if she was angry, she would hit out. If she was cross or tired she would kick. She would go for people who were the strongest and, unfortunately, as Gilly was the strongest and fittest - although she was not the skipper – she would be targeted. Gilly's main job on the boat was to fix anything that was broken and to row. Although they were all there to row, they each had their individual tasks. Gilly

had to know what her place was, as in other situations in her life, she would be “the skipper”. She knew that her job was to row, and if someone else was tired and she had to row an extra hour, then she would row. Gilly said that when you are living in close proximity with someone like that, it does not matter how mentally tough you are, it gets to you – it is like having a bully on board that you cannot switch off from. She was just there, constantly. It really got to Gilly and she recalls sending an email to one of her friends saying, “What do I do? I cannot take it any more”. The friend said “What choice do you have? You have to row home”. Gilly then reflected on what she was in control of and realised it was herself. She thought she had to be nice as it probably meant that this person was struggling. She was hitting Gilly and bruising her ribs – she was hurting her and Gilly thought she had to help her. Gilly had to change her brain and celebrate every success and start living in the moment. Every two hours was like a new day to her. She then began enjoying it and she rediscovered a part of her that she had never found before.

One of key goals was going past the Scilly Isles – they could not see them as it was cloudy. They had a massive celebration – they had saved a chocolate bar each and waved a flag and celebrated they only had 68 more nautical miles to go and had a hot chocolate. Gilly had some friends in New York who had given her a pack of digestive biscuits, which she had forgotten about – which was surprising when she had been so hungry all the time. She cracked open the biscuits.... and they had never tasted so good! Having had dehydrated days for the previous 47 days it just coated her mouth and that of the crew and they savoured it!

What made them successful? It was the Crew Code – Be respectful (understanding you or others need time out); be punctual – (be on time, don't expect others to chase you); be responsible –(own your tasks); and be positive (you choose and decide your mood and how long you are in it). Gilly still lives by this code today and has taken it to the next level.

Following this achievement, people then asked Gilly – what next? It was as though they were living their experiences through her. At that point, Gilly only wanted to celebrate what she had just achieved. It led her to a lot of other things and to push her professional career. She was working for Jaguar Landrover and everything started coming together as she realised that in order to be successful and drive forward, it is just a journey and she is the driver. She had so many people supporting her – friends, family and work colleagues, all the people watching them cross the Atlantic, people sending her jokes etc.

This all-female crew achieved a number of world records for rowing across the Atlantic in 49 days, 13 hours, 49 minutes and 33 seconds. In total, they hold five world records and two Guinness World Records.

This challenge led Gilly into a new world of sport – she rowed at the Commonwealth Games and she was told by an Olympian that she was one of the best athletes that she had ever met. She was told it was not just physique, but that it is ‘up here’ – your brain is so powerful. She has been around the world competing since then and her last competitive event was just before Covid-19 in China, when she got a Bronze Medal.

Since then, she has been continuing with her career – she is now the Global Head of Engineering for a FTSE 100 company in an executive position. In 2016, she was in her first managerial role in an engineering company, and now she has a whole team. Things happen for a reason as she *chooses* to succeed and takes what she has learnt from the ocean into her leadership. She realises she is the one driving herself forward.

This is what Gilly has achieved:

**2016**

Named in Top 100 Women in Engineering  
Became Chartered Engineer

**2017**

Named in top 20 Career Shifters  
X2 Guinness World Record Holder

**2018**

Commonwealth Silver Medallist England Rowing & European Medallist GB Dragon Boating

**2019**

World Bronze Medallist GB Rowing

**2022**

Nominated for top 50 Women in Engineering

Became Global Head of Engineering for FTSE 100 company

### **Leadership**

Gilly now acts as a mentor – whether it is managers, women in engineering or young people - and she asks them to consider what you can control and what can you influence – that is how you manage your stress.

#### *What you can control*

- You
- Your actions
- Your choices
- Your decisions

Gilly said she can influence everything else or be prepared for it.

#### *What you can't control*

- Other people – but you can influence
- Weather – but you can be prepared
- Environment – but you can decide how you act

Gilly lives by these rules – and has learnt there is a difference in how you consider 'Impossible!' or 'Impossible?' She advises that you must determine your goal but enjoy the journey getting there. You can only control yourself and influence others. Well, why not?

Gilly stressed that it is a wide circle of friends and family that keep her going and support her.