

Paddle for Sjögren's — Press Release (Media Version)

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Jacksonville Dad to Paddle the Length of Florida for His Daughter and Millions With Sjögren's

Local business owner Jason Parker launches the first annual Paddle for Sjögren's on Nov. 2, a solo, unsupported journey down the length of Florida

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (Oct. 09, 2026) Two years of pain, swelling, and unanswered questions. That is how Jason Parker's family first met Sjögren's disease, when his daughter Gabby was diagnosed at age 11. This November, the Jacksonville business owner will answer with 540 miles.

Parker, owner of Performance Painting, will launch the first annual Paddle for Sjögren's on Monday, Nov. 2, from Fort Clinch State Park in Fernandina Beach. He will begin at the Florida-Georgia line in the middle of the inlet, then paddle a stand-up paddle board down the Intracoastal Waterway to Fort Zachary Taylor State Park in Key West, covering 22 to 38 miles a day for an estimated 18 to 20 days. Every dollar raised will go to the Sjögren's Foundation to support research, with a fundraising goal of \$25,000.

"I really wanted an opportunity to combine an adventure with raising funds for this relatively unknown disease that's impacted a lot of people," Parker said. "I couldn't find anyone who'd paddled the whole state on a stand up, so call it a mid-life crisis solo adventure for a cause."

The cause is personal. Gabby's diagnosis came after two years of painful symptoms. Her parotid gland would become inflamed, her cheeks would swell, and the family felt stuck searching for answers. Many doctors were unsure what was causing her symptoms, and the family left appointment after appointment with more questions than answers. At one point, blood tests showed markers similar to certain types of cancer.

"I think that was the scariest moment," Parker said. "Another really heavy moment was coming to terms with the fact that this is a chronic condition and she will deal with it in some way the rest of her life." Parker later learned his own mother had been diagnosed with Sjögren's in her early thirties.

Sjögren's is a systemic autoimmune disease that attacks the body's moisture-producing glands and can cause profound fatigue, chronic pain, and serious complications. The Sjögren's

Foundation estimates that about four million Americans live with it, and roughly half of them are undiagnosed. On average, patients wait nearly three years from first symptoms to a diagnosis, and nine in 10 diagnosed patients are women, which makes a diagnosis at age 11 unusual. Money raised through the Paddle for Sjögren's will advance research aimed at understanding what causes the disease, identifying it earlier, preventing its progression, and developing treatments that change its course.

Parker will be unsupported for nearly the entire route, alternating hotel stays with camping. The one exception is an 18-mile open-water stretch between Key Biscayne and Boca Chita Key, where a boat escort will accompany him for safety. He has been training on both the ocean and the Intracoastal with 5 a.m. starts in the dark, logging sunrises and sightings of dolphins, manatees, sharks, redfish, and tarpon along the way.

"The worst part of a long paddle is being six hours in when the wind and tide turn against you with ten miles to go, and your shoulders and feet are screaming," Parker said. "But there's great satisfaction in finishing the day."

Parker is inviting Floridians to get involved by donating at PaddleForSjogrens.com, following the journey on Instagram at [@PaddleForSjogrens](https://www.instagram.com/PaddleForSjogrens), paddling a mile or ten alongside him, or, for those who live on the Intracoastal, offering a tired paddler a place to rest on their dock.

This year's paddle is a solo effort, but Parker hopes it is only the beginning. "I can envision an annual Paddle for Sjögren's where hundreds of people do a shorter endurance challenge together, each raising awareness and having a great time on the water," he said.

Both Jason and Gabby Parker are available for interviews ahead of the Nov. 2 launch, and the journey will be documented in photo and video. Media interested in covering the launch at Fort Clinch State Park can contact Stacey Steiner below.

About Jason Parker

Jason Parker is a father, a lifelong Neptune Beach native, and an avid paddler. He is taking on the Paddle for Sjögren's for his daughter Gabby, who was diagnosed with the disease at age 11. He has spent months training with early morning paddles along the coast and the Intracoastal Waterway, where sunrises, dolphins, and manatees are part of the routine.

Parker is also the founder and owner of Performance Painting, a local business headquartered in Neptune Beach, Florida. Follow his journey on Instagram at [@PaddleForSjogrens](https://www.instagram.com/PaddleForSjogrens), and learn how to donate and get involved at PaddleForSjogrens.com.

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