

## Israeli Flute of Light- Home of blood cancer patients



### **Lee Korzits will overcome this wave also - and win**

*She was first diagnosed at the age of 15, won her first world championship aged 19. Korzits | Photo: Ofer Chen*

**Over the past year, she's undergone 4 operations and lost 27 kg. The woman who was a 4-time world champion, one of Israel's greatest athletes, is currently fighting a rare bone marrow disorder Polycythemia Vera, (PV), and lives on a social security allowance, half of which she spent on medicinal cannabis. But during a revealing interview at the convalescent home where she is recovering, Lee Korzits insists on making it clear: one, I'm not miserable. Two, my body is already signaling that this time too it will find a way to win.**

Sitting in a small yard in Kibbutz Toval is Lee Korzits, four times world windsurfing champion, a therapy dog named Luna and a magazine reporter. The champion and reporter are seated on plastic chairs, the brown Labrador is lying on the bed of pine needles covering the ground. Korzits, the youngest athlete to ever win the World Windsurfing Championship, who was known for her great physical strength, is recovering from a year during which she underwent four complicated operations. She looks pale, her movements are slow and deliberate, and she is very thin. At the lowest point, Korzits says, she lost 27 kg of her total body weight.

The kibbutz is veiled beneath the elm and pine trees, between the peaks of the mountains that border on the south of the Upper Galilee. Korzits is recuperating here, in a complex named the Health House, from the damage caused to her body by a chronic blood disease and from her struggle against it. "They cut out my bladder eight years ago", she says, describing her first operation, "and then they removed parts of my intestine from which they tried to build a new bladder for me. It didn't work, and now they took another part of my intestine to create a conduit out of the body."

The Olympic surfer stands up and lifts a cropped T-shirt, much wider than her current body shape. She runs her hand over a round white bandage that is stuck to her stomach with a small, closed nozzle in the center. "One side is connected to the ureters of my kidneys, the other side comes out of the stomach and straight into the bag," she explains, and says that this is an improvement over her previous situation. "With I had before ruined my kidneys. It was very difficult for the body to expel the urine, so I constantly had reflux of urine into the kidneys, and was constantly in pain."



**“I couldn’t walk, my kidneys were shot, my body was falling apart, but it’s very strong. I believe and feel that it’s starting to recover”**

Korzits smiles and pushes aside, from her eyes, an interfering strand of long hair. A light breeze finds its way through the trees. Luna gets up, receives several pats and strokes and takes a walk around us. The subject is definitely not pleasant, and the pleasant atmosphere makes it very unpleasant.

The former world champion is currently living on a 100% social security allowance for people with disabilities - recently increased from the 97% she was granted after the first operation - and with the assistance of the Olympic Committee and the Sailing Association under the Ministry of Sports. "Hili Trooper really helped me," she says, "and

so did Gili Amir from the union and Yael Arad. I'm not here to give credit, but if she hadn't been there, I don't know how I would have managed financially. I don't have any official position, and from the time I finished the Olympics I couldn't do anything. Training (of Noy Darihan at the World Championship in Australia in 2020 - RG) was the last time I worked. I'm still not back to lecturing. I worked in my family's greenhouse, rooting seedlings, sitting, two hours here, two hours there. That's all".

For about a decade, Korzits has been using medicinal cannabis, first prescribed for her by a pain doctor in preparation for the London Olympics. "It helps me eat and gain weight, and also helps with the nausea due to the problems in the intestines and the pain in the kidneys. My blood disease causes my whole body to itch, and the cannabis relieves it. I sleep on my back attached to a urine bag over the kidneys, and it hurts all the time. It is only thanks to the cannabis that I manage to get a normal night's sleep, without it I can't live."

Korzits recently spoke about the issue with Linoy Bar-Geffen and Uriel Daskel in a special panel held at the Cannabis Time conference. "I heard a podcast by Linoy and Uriel about medical cannabis and I said, Wow, how don't they know that I'm the only person in Israel who won three world championships and the Olympics while on cannabis, with diapers, with pain and all the mess," she says, about what brought her to the conference. There, Daskel said that Korzits was in fact a Paralympic athlete who had beaten non-disabled athletes throughout her career.

### **I was in diapers for about four years**

Korzits suffers from a rare bone marrow disorder called Polycythemia vera, which causes Thrombocytosis - an increase in blood platelets - along with an increase in blood cells in general, and sometimes also Goiter. She was first diagnosed at the age of 15 due to a blood clot. Later, it was discovered that the condition was caused by an acquired genetic mutation called JAK2, which occurs in approximately 0.1%-0.2% of the population.



**“I suffer pain, I look anorexic, and I’ve learned to accept it. As an athlete, I lived to show that I was strong, but today I also show my weaknesses”**

Photo: Ofer Chen

"There was a time when I was in training and I couldn't see out of one eye," says Korzits, about her first encounter with Thrombocytosis. "A normal person has between 150,000 and 450,000 thrombocytes (platelets) per cubic milliliter of blood. When they discovered it in me, I had 700,000. Not terrible -"

**That's that terrible?**

"It's a lot, relatively. Like, it's a lot, but when I was 22-23, it went up to more than 1.1 million. Then it went up to 3 million, which is certain death, so they gave me

chemotherapy, that over time increases the body's acidity. This is a problem, when it's combined with training, with the lactic acids and all the cell breakdown of the muscle fibers that goes into the blood circulation. It's insanely acidic."

### **What does it cause?**

"My urine became very acidic, it caused sores and ulcers in the bladder. I lost all the lining, I literally had holes. The entire bladder shrunk to 40 ml, absolutely nothing. So for four years I was in diapers." During these four years of ulcers, pain and diapers, which began in 2011, Korzits won three world championships in a row and was a contender for a medal at the London Olympics until the last sail. "I had exposed nerves there, and every day acid touches an exposed nerve ", she says in the kibbutz yard. "I would pass out from terrible nerve pains." But Korzits learned to position her body on the board and time the sail movements according to her pain attacks.

In 2014, before her first operation, she already knew that she would have to walk around with a urine bag from now on. When I ask her about breaking points, Korzits says that there were many - and she recovered from all of them. Was the urine bag such a breaking point for someone who a year earlier was crowned world champion for the third time in a row and fourth overall? "The second they removed my bladder I was the happiest person in the world," answers Korzits. "I said, as long as they take away the crazy pain I experienced - I don't care about anything. I haven't realized at that point how much rehabilitation I had ahead of me and all that."

Then she says, "Just don't make me out to be miserable and pitiable. I've been through a lot, but I don't regret it. I think I should have gone through it, this is who I am today. It's just still hard to contain."

### **What is "it"?**

"You know that I suffer in my body, pain. That I look anorexic. But I learned to love the journey a lot. I mean not to love, because I don't like to suffer, but to accept it. I finally know how to stand up for myself, even towards society. Once upon a time I lived to show myself being strong, put on a facon. An athlete should only show strengths, and today I am both strong and weak. I have a lot of weaknesses."

## Like what?

"Forget it."

## Physically?

"Also physically. Can you imagine what it's like for me to go to the beach? You know what it's like to experience it, to contain how I feel about myself, how people look at me? The sea was my best friend, and it's not anymore. I can't do the things I did. I go to the sea and feel that I am not the same person, and it breaks me every time. But I think that in recent years I've been suffering less, and mentally I am very, very strong."

**"I was in a relationship, but he broke up with me before the first operation. In the 8 years since then, I've been single, I didn't want to drop such a heavy weight on anyone"**

Photo: Offer Chen



### **Is the difficulty mainly mental?**

"Yes, because as an athlete you ignore a lot of mental things in order to be strong. Only when you leave the sport, then you face everything you suppressed in order to be the best in the world."

### **You'd come to the beach as a conquering queen.**

"I'm still learning it, it's still really hard for me. It's hard for me to look at the sea. Really."

### **The biggest difficulty is wanting to get on a surfboard like you used to, and knowing you can't?**

"It's very difficult, but I don't eat my heart out. Today I'm in a place where I understand it, and a person who understands it can recover. Only a month and a half ago I entered the water for the first time. After a year in the hospital, I can go swimming in the pool to strengthen the body. I used to say, 'Hahaha, who want to enter a pool, ugh, chlorine'."

### **I have already recuperated myself, and boom, once again**

Lee Korzitss was born in 1984 in Emek Hefer and grew up in Hofit. She is the daughter of a swimmer and a lifeguard-fisherman-surfer who also gave birth to Tom (surfer) and Bar (surfer). When she turned 7, the family moved to Michmoret, where she joined the surfing club. At that time, her mother added the suffix "El" to her name, but almost no one calls her Lee-El.

At the age of 10, Korzits switched to Judo, and gave it up, after winning the Israel Championship for under 14, to return to the sea. She competed in the World Surfing Championship for Girls, and at the age of 16, the Sailing association joined her to sailor Linor Kliger, who was looking for a partner for the 470 model. This didn't suit Korzits, who always preferred the quietness of the surfboard, but they finished in second place in the country.

In 2002, at the age of 18, Korzits got involved in competitive windsurfing. "I started, in the first place, with surfing, it's my greatest love," she says. "I also really like windsurfing, but it's a kind of work."



Competing for the title of the greatest Israeli athlete. Korzits in 2011 | Photo: Mark Dadswell, Getty images

Korzits' work paid off. In 2003, at the age of 19, she became the youngest surfer ever to win the World Championship. Then, people also started talking about her as a competitor who knows how to read the sea like a book, an ability she sharpened during

her short time as a sailor - and with the physical strength that allowed her to create a torque from her 1.80 meters long body.

At the 2004 Athens Olympics, Korzits finished in 13<sup>th</sup> place, and shed tears of excitement when coach Gal Friedman crossed the finish line and won the first Israeli Olympic gold. Now, she related that she was even more excited when she witnessed the athlete that she coached win a big competition as a coach. "In 2019, before the World Championships in Australia, I was brought in to coach the Israeli women's surfing team. I coached Noy Darihan, who returned with a bronze medal, and when I saw my athlete on the podium, I felt more satisfied than in any of my World Championships. It was a crazy achievement for me".

But her body collapsed again shortly after that championship. "From the pressure, that's how I interpret it, with adhesions in all my intestines, and everything the first operation they did to my bladder was completely compressed. Everything there got mixed up, got tangled up."

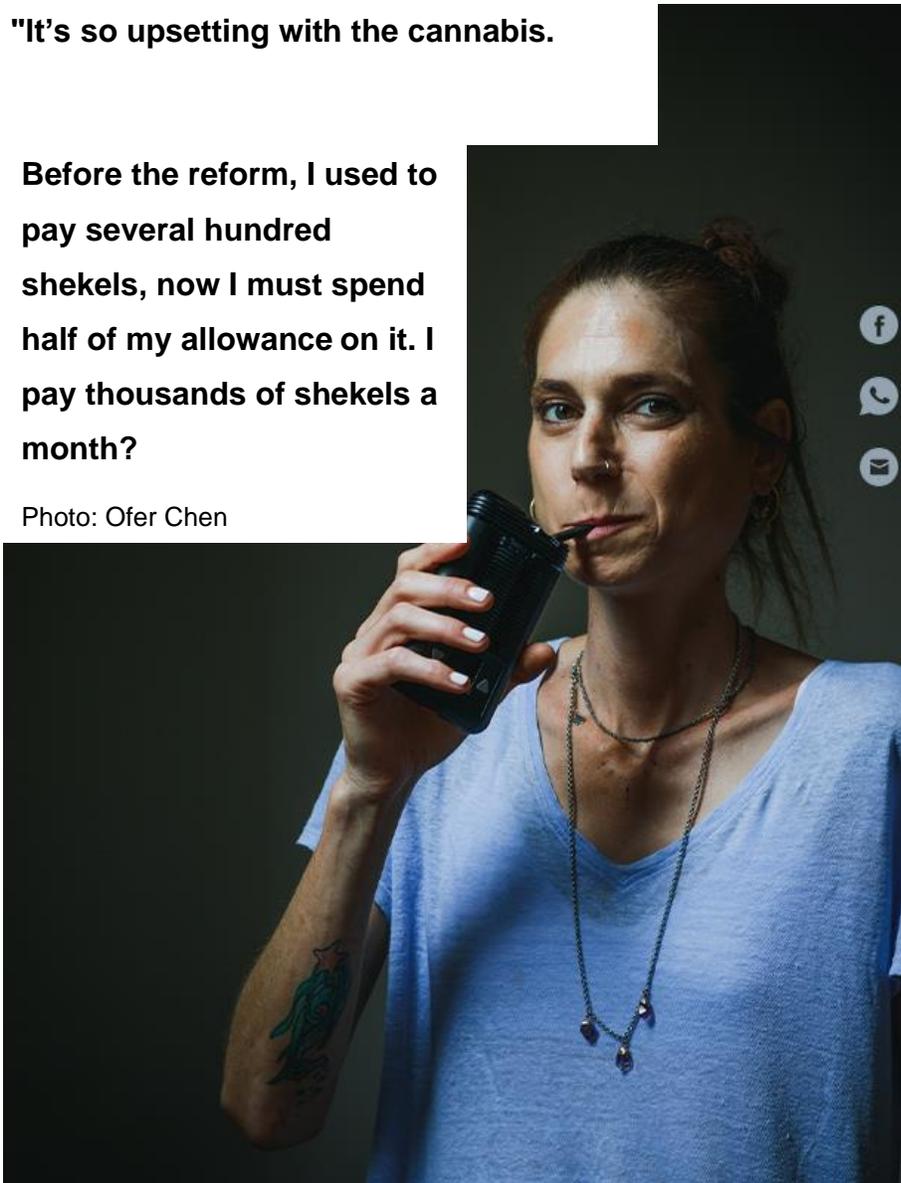
### **Is it because of the stress of working as a coach?**

"It's not just a mental thing, it's a burden on the body. I lowered boats into the water, lifted floats, lifted weights, trained under extreme conditions. Then suddenly I had a very severe intestinal obstruction out of nowhere, they put me in an emergency operating room. They removed almost all of my intestines and I had to go through the bladder surgery again, there was no choice. It was only during the operation I had this year that they corrected everything that was done before. Today my kidneys are no longer at risk."

**"It's so upsetting with the cannabis.**

**Before the reform, I used to pay several hundred shekels, now I must spend half of my allowance on it. I pay thousands of shekels a month?**

Photo: Ofer Chen



### **Why actually do you have intestinal problems?**

"Every time they open your stomach from the bottom to the top and take out all the intestines and put them back, it's no good. There are adhesions, there are intestinal loops. They also took pieces of my intestines to make a catheter for urine, so I had blockages all the time. I can be fine, I can feel good for a month, and then suddenly, I have a blockage in the intestine. I can't eat, drink, everything comes up - a gastric tube or surgery or they open it up with all kinds of substances. My body has been through a lot, and with a lot of stress, because despite the illnesses I continued to do sports. I had

surgery, I rehabilitated myself, returned to competing, then returned as a coach - and again, boom."

### **Sounds touch.**

"My body was torn apart."

### **Are you expected to undergo more operations?**

"Actually, I need another kidney, but I'm starting to recover, and the situation has really improved, so right now it was postponed. I believe and also feel that my body has really started to recover. Before I couldn't walk."

### **I love life**

Korzits underwent eight operations in her life - on the bladder, kidneys and intestines - all of which were related to her illness and not to sports accidents she suffered.

In 2009, while filming of her training in the Hawaiian Islands, an Israeli surfer who did not notice her hit her back. Korzits broke two ribs, which were detached from the spinal joint, and during the rescue, also broke her leg from the rocks, and was hospitalized in intensive care. She became addicted to morphine and was weaned from it in the hospital. After rehabilitation in Israel, where she strengthened her back muscles so that they could support her detached floating lower ribs and her spine, she returned to surfing.

A year later, at the European Championships in Poland, a French surfer collided with Korzits, who was stuck under the surfboard's wide sail. She was pulled out of the water unconscious and resuscitated by a French trainer. That year she finished sixth in the World Championship.

"My body is very strong," Korzits says at the "Health Center", where donations raised by her parents are funding her stay. "A lot of things happened to me because I'm just a crazy hyperactive person who loves adrenaline and trouble, and goes into the sea even when it's high."

### **You moved from Judo to the sea, and in the sea you were injured so many times.**

"Because I've always taken risks. Today I'm different but consider that I was raised as a girl with potential only for sports. That was the only thing I was good at. Not studies, not anything. I have eight years of schooling, and I went to five schools where I was diagnosed with ADHD. The only place where I found myself was in the sea, and there I was raised to do something specific. The goal was the Olympics, and you live in a bubble without seeing your surroundings. For me, the body was also a tool that would bring me to the goal. I knew how to work with it, to use it and to bring it to certain situations. I really did have strength. I didn't feel sick, I didn't understand. My mother cried when I was diagnosed, and I didn't understand what was happening. It wasn't until I retired from sports that I realized what had happened to my body."

**Do you feel that sports deteriorated over the course of your disease or maybe the other way around?**

"People try to break a person down into many parts, like they do in medicine - hematology, urology. But it's body and soul, and sport has been so good for who I am. It's brought me to amazing places."

**Do you go into surgery with the same competitive head?**

"Now I'm just learning to disconnect it, because that's what makes me sick."

**Please explain.**

"It's as if I feel programmed not to feel pain, not to show pain, because as an athlete you experience pain all the time and learn to ignore it. I'm also an insanely achievement-oriented person, and all these things put me in a very difficult situation. But I think that if I hadn't gone through these things, with the way my character is, I would now be in a psychiatric ward or a disgruntled person who doesn't like to live."

**You don't seem like that at all.**

"I love life!"



**“I was so happy when they removed my bladder. I said, as long as they take away the crazy pain I experienced - I don't care. I haven't realized at that point how much rehabilitation I had ahead of me”**

Photo: Ofer Chen

In a 2010 interview with Uri Talshir for Haaretz newspaper, Korzits said that she wanted to have children. In response to a question about her marital status, she now says: "I haven't been in a relationship since my first operation, eight years ago. I didn't want to bring this down on anyone. I was in a relationship before that, he broke up with me before the operation. I don't want to get into that."

### **I can help others. I'm sure**

"It's so upsetting with the cannabis", Korzits says on the phone the day after our meeting in Toval. "I had to renew my license, I have been on a certain dosage per

month for 12 years, and now they wrote to inform me that they only approve 20% of that. Just think: a person is used to a certain dosage, and suddenly one day they tell him 'that's it.' The reform created a real mess for me, and I'm not even referring to the cost, but to what it's done to my body. I would regularly receive certain strains, which were good for me. I knew exactly what I was taking every month. Since the reform, there are suddenly lots of varieties, imports from here, imports from there. Not the varieties I was used to."

### **Does it affect you that much?**

"It's different medication, something completely different. And then trial and error starts again every time, and when you finally find something good, then there is no consistency, and then it's not available. These changes, every time the medicine wasn't the same, would destroy me for months. If for a month I get something that doesn't suit me, I can't function for a month."

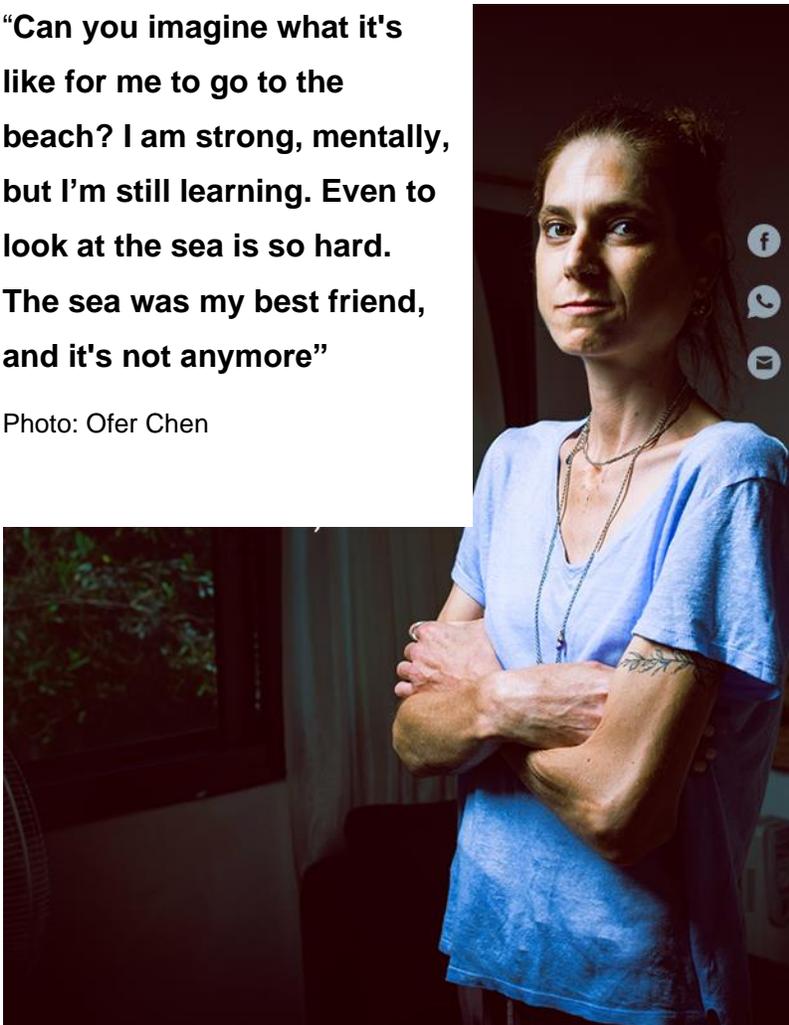
### **There are patients taking cannabis that turn to the black market.**

"I tried it too, but I didn't find the right variety. Today there is more consistency, but the prices are crazy. I spend more than half of my allowance on medical cannabis. Before the reform, I would pay a few hundred shekels, no matter how much I needed. Today I pay a several thousand shekels a month, everyone is experiencing it. And it's still cheaper than on the black market."

Most of the money Korzits earned during her career was spent on treatments and support. For instance, over the past six years she has participated in a study and received a medicine free of charge, that would have otherwise have cost her about NIS 40,000 a month. Only this year was this medication included in the national medication basket. "I must take it, I would die without it," she says. "Initially, I received chemotherapy treatment, which was probably what burned my bladder, then they switched me to biological treatment. Only after all of this did they put me in an immunotherapy study, that stabilized my body - these are the new drugs for cancer treatment."

**“Can you imagine what it's like for me to go to the beach? I am strong, mentally, but I'm still learning. Even to look at the sea is so hard. The sea was my best friend, and it's not anymore”**

Photo: Ofer Chen



Korzits types on her phone and shows me a WhatsApp message. "They just sent me the definition today, because the Halil Ha'or association asked me to raise awareness of the type of cancer I have. It is defined as chronic blood cancer."

**Is this definition new to you?**

"Yes, although there were always doctors who called my disease cancer and those who didn't. But I don't see myself as having cancer. Cancer, it's not. I have something chronic, I deal with it." She hugs Luna the dog and says, "She's my best friend, she's the caregiver."

**How many people in Israel have this genetic mutation?**

"I don't know. I was never really involved, I just wasn't connected to it. I'm starting just now, because I think I can help a lot of people."

### **Is this your new mission?**

"The mission is to help myself, and I know that once I get myself to the place I want to be, I will be able to help others. I'm sure."

### **It's confusing to learn to live on land**

Korzits is a good contender for the title of the greatest Israeli athlete ever. She is the first Israeli to win a world championship in an Olympic sport, and the only one to win more than one of these; She was the youngest ever and greatest ever windsurfing world champion, one of two to win a total of four world championships; And also the first RS:X surfer to win two championships in a row, and the only one to win three.

In 2011, eight years after winning the World Championship for the first time, Korzits won a gold medal again at the World Championships in Australia, then in Spain. Shortly after that, she competed at the 2012 London Olympics; She was deep into her illness at the time, yet she led the pack or was in the medal trio throughout the first week, but in the last three days she weakened and lost the medal in the last sail. "It was difficult for me, at the last second I lost a medal. I said: I will never retire like this." About six months later, in March 2013, she won her fourth World Championship in Brazil.

Korzits gets up to put on a gray sweatshirt. The sun had just dropped below the height of the trees. "People often ask what the secret to success in sports is, but there is no secret. You build a puzzle, and for me all the pieces came together. The connection to the sea, even judo, the strength, the rivalries. Many people and many things came together to create the picture for me."



Photo: Ofer Chen

Athletes talk about the retirement crisis. With her, it was even more than that. "Once, everything revolved around the sea, and today I am learning what land is. Imagine, from the age of 7 a person lives every day for three to four hours alone with herself, in meditation in the sea, listening to the wind that touches her ears, transferring the energy of the wind that gets stuck in the sail through the body to the surfboard standing on the water. There are currents, and I have to make waves and go down, go up and down - otherwise I won't be fast - and see my competitors and count the clouds. This is what I lived for, and suddenly you live on land and there are traffic lights constantly breaking your pace. It's not me. Learning to live on the land is confusing, but now I'm already in the finale, I already feel that everything is coming together and I also want to live a more relaxed life."

### **How do you enjoy yourself and relax without surfing?**

"Very optimistically. Part of my rehabilitation plan was to do things I love on land, so I started growing organic vegetables. Little by little I built an organic garden, and every time I would come home from the hospital to Hofit I'd see how my plants had grown. I started cooking healthy, I do everything in order to reach the next objective in the right

way, to get a little stronger, maybe go to the sea. But also to moderate the waves according to which I always lived and put some soil in the sea. To give a little stability, to balance the entire tangle."