

ONING

IF YOU WANT TO STAY FIT, SIGN UP FOR LIFEGUARD DUTY. YOUR FEET POUND THE HOT SAND AS YOU RACE DOWN THE BEACH INTO THE WAVES ON A RESCUE MISSION. YOU CLOSE YOUR EYES AGAINST THE STING OF THE SALTY SPLASH AS YOU PROPEL YOURSELF TOWARDS THE DISTRESS CRY. YOUR HEART'S IN YOUR EARS AND YOUR STOMACH'S IN YOUR MOUTH AS YOU PRAY YOU MAKE IT IN TIME. YOU PULL THE SWIMMER TO SHORE ON A RESCUE BOARD AND COMFORT THE FAMILY AS THEY STAND HUDDLED AND HELPLESS IN THE SAND. YOUR LEGS BURN AND YOUR CHESTS HEAVES AS YOU GULP IN OXYGEN.

YOU LEAVE THE SHAKEN SWIMMER AND THEIR RELIEVED FAMILY TO EMBRACE. YOU STEP AWAY FROM THEIR MOMENT AND TRY TO CONTROL YOUR OWN—BREATHE IN, BREATHE OUT. YOU FEEL YOUR PULSE SLOW; YOU WIPE THE SWEAT FROM YOUR EYES. THANK GOD FOR DAILY WORKOUTS.

SOME OF THE LIFEGUARDS ON AREA BEACHES AREN'T READY TO RETIRE TO THE CARIBBEAN JUST YET. THOUGH LIFEGUARDING IS PHYSICALLY STRENUOUS, THESE MEN DON'T LET THEIR AGE KNOCK THEM DOWN. WHEN THEIR PEERS MIGHT ONLY USE THE BEACHES FOR SUNSET WATCHING, THESE MEN OVERCOME RED TIDE, RIP TIDE AND ROUGH SURF TO KEEP SARASOTA COUNTY BEACHES SAFE.

GUARD

BY ALLISON PINKERTON



ROY ROUTH

Sarasota County Beach Patrol Captain Roy Routh started lifeguarding in 1982. He didn't plan on making lifeguarding a career; during his time as a lifeguard he's also worked on motorcycles and as a musician. But, the ocean kept calling him, even without a conch shell held up to his ear.

"The salt water gets in your veins," he said.

Roy grew up around the water, practically marking his growth spurts with the tides. A Florida native, he remembers going to the beach and boating with friends before he made the beach his office. He says there's a misconception that lifeguarding is relaxing. Don't be fooled; the beach isn't always a paradise. Sometimes there are more pressing things to think about than whether or not your Nicholas Sparks book will have a happy ending. For lifeguards the beach can be a battleground, the ocean can be an adversary.

Roy said lifeguards train daily to keep in top

physical condition. They must stay conditioned in order to respond to emergencies.

"We have to stay fit," he said.

Roy sees the year round physical conditioning as a job perk—he doesn't have to buy a gym membership. Each lifeguard runs, swims, paddles rescue boards and lifts weights to stay fit.

Roy said each year it's getting harder to keep up with the younger lifeguards he trains. But he feels he must lead by example. Pointing them in the direction of the swell out to which they're required to paddle to rescue a distressed swimmer won't cut it.

The work atmosphere can switch quickly from calm to stressful quickly, Roy said. The more experience you have, he says, the easier it becomes to go from 0-60 in a minute. With the rocky jetties, potentially hazardous marine life and strong currents, beach lifeguards have to be ready to assist at any moment. Saving lives gives Roy a rush.

He tells the story of a young boy caught in a rip tide four years ago. He recalls the weather was stormy and the waves were rough. Roy could hear the young boy's family crying onshore as he paddled out 125 yards to find the child. Roy began to pray.

"Dear Lord, let me reach this kid before he goes under," he said.

Roy prayed he wouldn't run out of time; he dreaded having to face the family on the beach without their son in his arms.

Roy found the child and they both made it safely back to shore.



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JERRY COLLETTE

“It’s one of the most rewarding feelings,” he said. Jerry Collette, 58, became a lifeguard five years ago after 30 years as an elementary school teacher in New York and a GED teacher at the New York Department of Corrections.

He moved to Florida and was teaching elementary school in Bradenton. He was working out on an area beach and stopped by the lifeguard stand to ask about summer employment for his then college-aged daughter.

The lifeguard on duty offered him a job, as long as he could pass the physical endurance test.

He passed, and he gave the elementary school his two-week notice.

Collette felt closed in by being indoors all the time. So, he decided to try lifeguarding, which would allow him to be outdoors and active, while indulging his new love for water sports.

And another reason he’s enjoys lifeguarding: a teenage girl came up to him on the beach and thanked him for saving her life when she was caught in a rip tide.

Unlike Roy, Jerry grew up in the Adirondacks and his only exposure to water was the swimming portion of the triathlons in which he competed. When he moved to Florida, he realized a love for the gulf.

“It (lifeguarding) was a natural extension of my lifestyle,” he said. On his days off, Jerry trains on a bicycle. He will soon compete in the USA Triathlon National Championships in Burlington, VT.

Even though he trains daily, Jerry sometimes finds it difficult to be prepared physically for the job.

“You’re only one injury away from retirement,” he joked.

If he stays injury free, Jerry would like to train as long as possible. He sees his future in a man he watches over on lifeguard duty—a man in his 70s who still paddle skis.



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JON SHIELDS



Jon Shields divides his lifeguarding job into two parts: he's part welcoming committee and part physical fitness enthusiast. Jon, 55, has been lifeguarding in Sarasota County for 34 years. He meets people from all over the world during his time in the lifeguard stand. He introduces them to Sarasota County attractions and teaches them about the local coastal ecology.

Physical fitness is an equally important part of Jon's job. Each lifeguard trains every day from 9-10 a.m., he says, and then swims, lifts weights or runs during breaks throughout the day. Twice a year, each lifeguard takes a physical endurance test.

"Physical endurance is paramount," he said. "We have to be ready at any moment."

Though he's in his 50s, he doesn't have a problem keeping up with the younger lifeguards.

"I can usually put the 25-year-olds through their paces," he said.

Jon emphasizes the fact that sometimes no matter how physically fit you are, you can still find yourself in threatening situations.

He tells a story about rescuing swimmers in 2005. When Jon and his coworker got the distress call, they paddled out to the swimmers who were being swept out

by the current.

There were three swimmers, two lifeguards and one serious case of red tide.

Jon tossed a life buoy to the first swimmer and swam to the other without one. Then he and his coworker pulled the panicked swimmers into shore, breathing in red tide and pushing dead fish away as they swam. The swimmers spent a couple of days in the hospital and were released.

"It's always rewarding when you know you've saved a life," he said.

For Roy, Jerry and Jon, lifeguarding is not an excuse to get a tan or run around in red bathing suits. This is not Baywatch; Pamela Anderson has no place on their lifeguard stand.

It is a solemn duty to protect and serve locals and tourists enjoying the area's beautiful natural resources.

These lifeguards see their job as more akin to emergency first responders than eye candy.

Lifeguards on Sarasota County Beaches and in area pools paddle, lift, run and swim to stay fit. Physical fitness is important as saving lives. Staying fit keeps everyone safe. |

