

CANNON BEACH LIFEGUARDS

Carrying on a tradition

Moments of reward, exhilaration

By Brenna Visser
Cannon Beach Gazette

When Jesse Willyard was growing up in Cannon Beach, he didn't have much interest in becoming a lifeguard.

But his career as one started before he was even officially hired to join the Cannon Beach lifeguard team 11 years ago during his 15th birthday party.

"I was skimboarding north of Haystack Rock when a kid ran up and said his brother had been swept up in the ocean," Willyard said. He said he saw the child's head bobbing up and down in the waves and decided to swim out and bring him back to shore.

The lifeguards on duty noticed his actions and brought him into the program shortly after, he said. He officially joined the summer of his 16th birthday and has been a lifeguard ever since.

"I have always been comfortable in the water. I grew up surfing," Willyard said. "So I didn't really worry whether or not I was going to make it — I just ran out. At the least, I thought, I could keep his head above water."

"I've never been afraid of the ocean," he continued. "I suppose that's a good quality to have in this line of work."

Willyard is one of eight lifeguards in charge of protecting the lives of the thousands of visitors who frequent Cannon Beach during the summer. While the position is seasonal, Cannon Beach's lifeguard team is rooted in decadeslong tradition, and upheld by a team of people dedicated to returning year after year — and for some, decade after decade.

Where it began

The origin of the lifeguard program can be traced to the town's first lifeguard in 1938, making the program almost 80 years old and one of the oldest on the West Coast. According to the historical text "Comin' in over the Rock," the first lifeguard, W.W. Ross, felt strongly about the town's need for a summer lifeguard and placed collection jars around town to pay for lifeguards for several years.

Today, it is a staple of the Cannon Beach Police Department, and almost everyone on the team has been a lifeguard for at least three to five years, program supervisor and Cannon Beach Police Chief Jason Schermerhorn said.

While drownings are still relatively rare on

the Oregon Coast, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention lists drowning as the fifth-leading cause of unintentional deaths in the United States. The U.S. Lifesaving Association calculates the chance of drowning on a beach with lifeguards is 1 in 18 million.

Cannon Beach and Seaside are the only two coastal cities in Oregon with formal lifeguarding programs.

A day in the life

One misconception head lifeguard Brian Habecker likes to clarify is the notion of lifeguards being "beach bums" or "slackers."

"Everyone here has a college degree or is a student pursuing one — I know at least three of us have master's," Habecker said. "We're easy-going people, but very serious when it counts."

Habecker has been a lifeguard in Cannon Beach for 15 years, the last five as leader. He describes his team as driven, hard-working and all with similar passions and perspectives on recreating in the ocean. These similarities are by design, he said.

"Part of the reason we are such a strong team is because we recruit locally," Habecker said. "I taught Jesse as a sixth-grade student, and when he got into college, I asked him to apply for the job."

It's a pattern that has worked well. Habecker himself, an English teacher at Broadway Middle School, was recruited by John Rippey, who at the time was an educational assistant when he was a student and head lifeguard for 25 years. Generations of recruitment turned into one large, locally grown family, he said.

"There is a total respect and bond in this group," Habecker said.

Up in the tower, Willyard said much of his day is spent meticulously scanning the beach, and answering questions like "Where is the bathroom?" and "Why are there dead birds on the beach?"

Getting to work where he likes to play isn't a bad perk either, he said.

"It's one of the best summer jobs around," he said.

Hours of training

But hours of training go into preparing for the rescues that Habecker said average about one a month. Because there are only two beach towns with formal lifeguards, much of the training regimen has been passed down generation to generation, largely created and directed by the staff themselves, Habecker said.



Cannon Beach lifeguard Jesse Willyard keeps a close eye on the surf and the sand from his perch atop a lifeguard stand last week near Haystack Rock.

COLIN MURPHEY/IEO MEDIA GROUP

Every morning in the summer, lifeguards do a half hour of either cardio or weightlifting with Cannon Beach Fire and Rescue. Before the season starts, the group meets in June to learn first aid, conduct mock rescues out in riptides and rocks and swimming drills that require lifeguards to swim all the way around Haystack Rock.

But every year is different. Some years Willyard has only seen close calls, others as high as 20. He has done only a handful of rescues, but described each one as a shot of adrenaline, and then a wave of relief.

"It can be hectic, but luckily we have people who have been here multiple seasons," Willyard said. "It's about paying attention to every person."

In most cases, the goal is to focus on preventative measures: namely, educating folks not to turn their back to the water, identifying rip currents and warning beachgoers to stay away from those areas. But when that isn't an option, Willyard and Habecker both said the most common rescue scenario involves beachgoers getting caught in strong currents.

"The more you do it, the less daunting it is," Habecker said. "What other people see as heroic, we find exciting. The ocean brings a lot of fear because of the unknowns, and people assume we have the same fear, but for us it's not an unknown."



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Seaside High graduate Kai Davidson, left, and Darlington Nagbe of the Portland Timbers will be a part of the Timbers' visit to the North Coast in August.

Timbers to stop in Seaside

Seaside Signal

The North Coast is back on the "Rose City Road Trip" list, the Portland Timbers' annual tour of community events and youth soccer clinics throughout the Pacific Northwest.

This year's tour will include stops in Seaside and Warrenton, as the Timbers return to the North Coast as part of their sixth-annual Rose City Road Trip, presented by Providence Health & Services.

Monday, Aug. 14, Timbers' midfielder Darlington Nagbe, midfielder/defender Lawrence Olum, defender Roy Miller and Timber Joey will begin the day with a visit to Providence Seaside Hospital from 9-10 a.m., spending time with patients before heading to Warrenton Grade School from 10:30 a.m.-noon to help install "buddy benches," a project invented by 10-year-old Christian Bucks, that gives children a safe, nonjudgmental place to retreat.

The day continues with a youth soccer clinic being led by the Timbers youth development staff (which includes Seaside High graduate Kai Davidson) for children ages 5-13.

The clinic is scheduled for 1:30-3:30 p.m. at Warrenton Soccer Complex on Ridge Road in Hammond. Free and open to the public, the clinic will feature a training session, along with an autograph and Q&A session. Participants must pre-register online at www.timbers.com/rosecity-roadtrip.

Closing out the visit, players and Timber Joey will join fans at Astoria's Fort George Brewery, 1483 Duane St., for a Q&A, raffle, autographs and pictures from 4:30-6:30 p.m., before returning to Portland.

In previous years, the Timbers have visited Klamath Falls, Salem, Eugene/Springfield, Bend, Hood River, Astoria, Medford, Pendleton, Coos Bay, The Dalles, Corvallis and Vancouver, Washington.

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