

# Lifeguard's degree makes history.

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A REAL LIFESAVER      New college program yields its first graduate .

Michael Clegg Jr. got to graduate first in his class, but the honor has nothing to do with grades. This week, he became the first person in the United States -- possibly the world -- to earn a college degree in lifeguarding at Miramar College, so far the only program of its kind in the nation. "I wanted to be a part of history," said Clegg, 20.

He was not at all influenced by "Baywatch," the television series known for its preposterous plots and glistening bodies. Not a bit.

"I think we've gotten kind of a negative image from 'Baywatch,'" he said.

Rather, Clegg, a San Diego lifeguard, realized his life's calling by the time he was old enough to get a driver's license. Lifesaving is in his blood, his genes. Not only is his uncle, Troy Keach, a San Diego lifeguard sergeant, his sister, Michelle, is a summer lifeguard for the same agency.

Growing up in Lakeside, Clegg listened to tales of harrowing ocean rescues during camping trips with his uncle, who brought along his lifeguard friends. Hearing the stories, the romance of the profession filled his mind and he felt the camaraderie that lifeguards have for their colleagues. Clegg's life has revolved around being in the water. He played water polo in high school. He learned to surf and became a Jet Ski instructor. He bodysurfed at Black's Beach when the waves had 14-foot faces. "I'd rather be out there with no board at all," he said. "I'm confident in my own abilities."

Clegg got the chance to really flex his flippers at 17, when he became a summer lifeguard. "There's no other job like it in the world," he said. "It makes you feel fulfilled when you go home." He already has had his share of risky rescues. Last summer, he saved four tourists -- at once -- after they were swept out to sea by a rip current. Clegg held up two of the panicked swimmers as he stood in neck-deep water, while the other two held on to a life buoy Clegg had brought. "I could only breathe at the trough of each wave," he said. Bystanders eventually jumped in the water and helped. Clegg was not finished. That same day he rescued seven other distressed swimmers.

Rescuing a drowning swimmer from a churning ocean is comparable to running into a burning building: The degree of peril is extremely high. But success in the job requires more than a jolt of adrenaline. The numerous tasks now performed by lifeguards, from swift water rescue to cliff rescue to boating safety enforcement, require lots of training and expertise. Clegg belongs to a generation of lifeguards who see themselves as serious professionals.

"This is the first (lifeguarding degree) we know of in the world," said Nick Lerma, a San Diego lifeguard lieutenant who spearheaded the creation of the new associate's degree program offered at Miramar College in Mira Mesa.

Lifeguards in Orange and Los Angeles counties also are starting their own degree programs. The degree awarded to Clegg marks the beginning of lifeguards gaining the respect, pay and responsibility that other public safety services enjoy, said Don Rohrer, president of the U.S. Lifesaving Association. "This is a fairly historic event," Rohrer said. "This is a first. I think it will bring a lot of recognition to the profession." Since the 1960s, lifeguarding has evolved from a summer job held by laconic beach boys and surfers into a true profession, said Rohrer, who retired as chief of the Los Angeles County Lifeguard Service in 1996. "The talent now in lifeguarding is incredible," he said. "If you look at all the hats they have to wear -- divers, boat operators, emergency medical technicians -- the lifeguards today are vastly superior to those of us who began in the '50s and '60s."

With his degree, Clegg hopes to find a full-time lifesaving job and wants to specialize in swift water rescue and boating rescue. Even as the profession becomes more high-tech, a lifeguard's primary purpose always will be to prevent drownings, Clegg said. "When you save one person, you affect more like 20 people -- their family members, their kids," he said. "I don't think there's anything more rewarding than that."

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