

Perspectives of a Del Mar Student Lifeguard

by Liza Whitehead

Liza Whitehead is a first year student lifeguard and a junior at Torrey Pines High School

‘Will I have to make a rescue the first day?’ The question plagued me in the days leading up to my first summer job as a student lifeguard in Del Mar, California. That nagging question loomed even more ominously than my other concern: ‘Will I be the only girl trainee?’ As it turned out, I did make rescues, but not the first day, and not before extensive training. And there *were* other girls. We bonded and held our own in a rigorous training program headed by Pat Vergne, Chief Lifeguard, and Deputy Mark Rathsam and Sergeant Jim Lischer.

I was always a strong swimmer, competing in high school varsity water polo and swimming. And I had previously attended junior lifeguard programs. I also had volunteered in city services and at a local hospital. But this was the real thing - a paid job and a big responsibility! As one of nearly a dozen high-school-aged guards, our task was to learn the ropes and support the regular staff during the busy summer peak, providing coverage for nearly 2 miles of beach. We would join established summer guards, some returning from college each year, and permanent year-round staff.

Daily training involved running barefoot the length of the beach. Running on sand sounds luxurious, but my painful foot ligaments taught me that, as a repetitive endeavor, it takes its toll. A senior guard displayed his flat feet as a testament to the rigors of beach running. Senior guards became increasingly creative in designing additional training exercises unique to each day. One had us doing push-ups in a foot of water. Another required us to swim the 2 mile length of the beach in the surf break zone, or paddleboard as a long parade to the next city up the coast and back. The ultimate was a challenge to grasp handfuls of colored fish tank gravel and swim in and out of the surf break zone close-fisted, attempting to return with the most gravel. We girls vowed to outdo certain male cohorts- and we did!

The early summer saw particularly extensive training since a longer than normal red tide kept crowds out of the water and the rip currents were few. By mid-summer, however, the throngs arrived crowding beach and water alike. Managing crowds and dry-land issues were a surprisingly major part of our job. The biggest challenge by far was on the 4th of July with 35,000 visitors swarming every inch of the beach. From our vantage point in the tower at 26th street a senior guard and I saw early morning alcohol consumption, a mid-afternoon female mud-wrestling match which culminated in an evening drunken brawl with punches thrown, police helicopters, and teargas fired from shotguns! We tended to cut lips, burning eyes, and frantic beach patrons.

Surf rescues also became part of a day’s work -even for student guards. Our training paid off in skill, confidence, and the knowledge that the guards function in all situations as a team. While there was always back-up, for each guard, making rescues was a personal thrill. As a 16 year old girl, I will long remember one rescue that had me towing to shore an individual who had been struggling to make headway with a body-board in a rip current. The grateful, somewhat embarrassed victim was, to my astonishment, a 25 year- old, 6 foot Marine! What a summer!



Winners of Junior Lifeguard Safety Poster contest, from L to R: Pat O'Hara, volunteer Brendon Strause, Ashley Cushing, Christian Cabrera Carrillo, Liza Whitehead, Melissa Grant, and volunteer Jeff Robins.