

Decades later, lifeguard still devotes himself to ‘cool job’

By Claire McNeill Globe correspondent July 19, 2014

Steve Haines for The Boston Globe

Greg Johnson scanned waters off of Cape Cod, where he has been lifeguarding since 1979.

Part of a continuing series.

ORLEANS — People said it was like a tornado in the water, like swimming through a stone wall.

Greg Johnson stood on the beach and watched swimmers battle a riptide so strong it broke a sandbar and made national news. Dozens and dozens of people, old and young, fought the ragged pull of the current. It was August 1973 on Nauset Beach.

A handful of lifeguards fought to pull the swimmers out a few at a time, plunging in again and again. No one drowned that day.

“That was the defining moment for me,” Johnson says in a soft voice. He was a middle-schooler then, wide-eyed at the wild scene. “That was when I thought, ‘What a cool job.’”

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Four decades later, Johnson sits in the driver's seat of a town pickup truck, driving through the small beach town of Orleans, quiet in a cold summer rain. The sky is a hazy gray; pale dune grass bows in the wind.

It has been a mellow summer on Nauset Beach, where the white-haired Johnson is head lifeguard. So far, there have been only two rescues, and five children who wandered away from their parents and had to be found. In summers past, they have had single afternoons busier than that.

A rainy day like this, with a near-empty beach and no one in the 55-degree sea, is a welcome rest. Sometimes, Johnson admits, he can get a little burned out from the relentless sun.

“If you don’t like to handle a lot of idle time, you’re not going to like the job,” he says.

In the back of the truck is a bright paddleboard the lifeguards call Lime, strapped down with care by Johnson. It is for an upcoming competition in Virginia Beach, the National Lifeguard Championships, where Johnson is a contender in the paddleboard event and the 2-kilometer beach run.

Incredibly fit at 55 years old, he works out almost every day. It keeps him ready.

“It’s like being a fireman,” he says. If things get out of control, “you better find that place in your head where you can be cool and calm.”

Johnson is an institution at the picturesque Cape Cod beach, where he has been lifeguarding since 1979. Other guards call him “groovy” and “super chill.” One man joked about Johnson: “the old man and the sea.” And, they say, he’s still the best at the job, a legend.

Johnson grew up in Sudbury. His family came to Orleans each summer for a few weeks, then a few months, and then they bought a house. He loves this place.

Most days, he watches the beach from the plexiglass central guard tower, with two wooden stands to his left and two to his right. Crowded days bring 3,000 to 4,000 people. Still, in his 36 summers here, he has come to know people.

“I’ve seen kids grow up from tiny little things to adults with their own families,” he says.

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Johnson plans to take part in National Lifeguard Championships at Virginia Beach; he will compete in a paddleboard event and a 2-kilometer run.

Beach visitors always want to know about the sharks. Johnson has seen them, but he knows they are generally not interested in humans. They have always been here; they always will be. More common are sightings of their food, the seals. Sometimes Johnson sees the seals roll down the coast in huge pods like a motorcycle gang.

A lot of lifeguarding is sitting and waiting for something to happen, scanning the surf for people knocked about in the chop. Guards help with cuts and scrapes and dehydration and with alerting swimmers to riptides, but most of the time, things are quiet.

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Johnson has become a legend for his years at Nauset Beach.

“You just focus on what’s in front of you and let it flow,” Johnson says. “Your thoughts are with the waves.”

What the beach does is root him in the present. He presses his feet into the sand.

“We’re too distracted,” he says, pretending to fiddle with a cellphone. “You have to be here, right in the moment, watching people.”

He calls lifeguarding a lifestyle. Family legacies run deep at Nauset Beach, where parents often pass the torch to their children. Johnson says he is like a

father figure to many of the 25 guards he trains and oversees.

He thinks he can make it to 40 summers of guarding. Then he'll see. But he knows he won't be far from the water.

“The ocean does have a soothing, calming thing on people's energy,” he says. “I couldn't go back and live in suburbia. I have to know that the water is down the street.”

Johnson says he is a true Cape Codder, one of the many there who have cobbled together a living. He is a personal trainer and a teacher and a junior varsity lacrosse coach. He sings in a James Taylor tribute band with his fiancée, whom he'll marry in September right by the beach in a pretty wooden gazebo. He paints sprawling murals of whales and dolphins and sharks and turtles, big paintings that, to him, say freedom and spirituality.

Money has been far from his mind since he lost his parents and his older brother. Life is short, and more important than being wealthy, he says, is the pursuit of happiness.

On his pinky finger, Johnson wears a silver ring that he found on the beach. In a looping cursive it says, “Love Life.” On the inside, it says, “Be Brave.”

“That's the key to life,” he said. “Do what you love to do.”

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