

Del Mar lifeguards mark 50-year milestone with tide of memories

Public invited to celebration June 27 at Powerhouse Center

By [Kristina Houck](#) 8 a.m. March 23, 2015



Del Mar Lifeguards in 1965. Front: Jack Ross, Gardner Stevens, Ron Jensen. Back: Paul Kraus, Gerry Meier, Peter Critchlow. — *Courtesy Del Mar Historical Society*

From patrolling the beach to protecting lives, lifeguards play an important part in the city of Del Mar. In fact, not long after Del Mar became a city, the community established its own department. March 2015 marks the 50th anniversary of the Del Mar Lifeguard Department.

“The lifeguard service is an important department for the city,” said Patrick Vergne, Del Mar’s lifeguard chief. “When people come to Del Mar, they think of the beach. That’s why this milestone is so significant.”

Beachside beginnings

Del Mar was incorporated on July 15, 1959. At the time, the city contracted its lifeguard services from San Diego County. For six months of the year, lifeguards oversaw the city’s 2.5 miles of beach and operated two stations.

Because the city’s contract with the county was costly, however, it became a campaign issue during the 1964 council elections.

Having championed a city-run department, Earl Maas persuaded the rest of the council not to renew the county’s contract shortly after his re-election. Maas, who became the mayor, had served as a lifeguard for 10 years in Los Angeles County.

“They just let me run with it because it was an area I had knowledge in, and the other council members had none,” Maas recalled. “They were willing to go along with whatever I wanted to do, if we could save money and do a better job.”

In 1965, the city ceased the county contract to form its own department. Selected from 32 applicants, Gardner Stevens was hired as Del Mar’s first lifeguard captain.

Maas knew Stevens from his time as a lifeguard. Stevens, who was 39 when he was hired as captain, previously served as a lifeguard in Los Angeles.

One of Stevens' first acts in creating the new department was to select staff. He hired five lifeguards from 24 applicants.

Service began on March 1, 1965.



The Del Mar Lifeguard Headquarters in 1965. — *Courtesy Del Mar Historical Society*

"Gardner did the job and did it well," Maas said. "He had a nice group of guys that worked for him. He taught them to watch the water and what to look for. The council was very happy with him."

Headed by Gardner, lifeguards Peter Critchlow, Ron Jensen, Paul Kraus, Gerry Maier and Jack Ross managed two lifeguard towers: the main tower at 17th Street and another at 25th Street.

Ross was 19 when he became a member of the department's first team. He had previously worked as a lifeguard at a pool in Japan, where his father was stationed in the U.S. Navy.

The starting pay for lifeguards at the time was \$2.10 per hour.

"There weren't a lot of people then, so the six of us could pretty much handle what was going on," said Ross, who recalled watching the beach from the two towers and a portable tower on 20th Street. He and other lifeguards also used a hand-me-down GMC truck from the county to patrol the rest of Del Mar's coastline.

During the first year, all six lifeguards worked on the Fourth of July. There were 100 surfers, 400 swimmers and 1,500 total beachgoers.

What started as a summer job became a 20-year career.

Ross, a San Diego native who has lived in Encinitas since 1977, fondly remembers his two decades with the department, during which he spent six years as second in charge.

“There’s always the satisfaction of saving somebody,” said Ross, who also worked as a science teacher in Oceanside. He retired from lifeguarding in 1985. “That’s the biggest pleasure from the job. You’re making a big mark on somebody’s life.”

Developing department

Gardner headed the department until he retired in 1982. During his tenure, he built the city’s lifeguard headquarters, hired the region’s first female ocean lifeguard and launched the junior lifeguard program.

He died in 2002 at age 76.

“Gardner was a fun guy to work with,” Ross recalled. “He treated us like his sons.”

After Gardner’s retirement, Grant Larson was appointed captain.

A Del Mar native, Larson started as a lifeguard with the department in its second year in 1966. At the time, the 17-year-old surfer was a student at San Diego State University.

“Gardner saw the potential in me as a lifeguard,” said Larson, who admitted he was “never a fast swimmer.”

“It was a great honor to become captain.”

With Larson at the helm, the department expanded and took on new responsibilities. He consolidated the lifeguard department with associated beach maintenance, parking enforcement, code enforcement and park permitting services.

“When I came on, I realized we needed to start enforcing laws,” Larson said. “Part of the evolution of the department was the need for more regulation.”

Larson also launched the lifeguard trainee program, which gave him a pool of proven applicants to choose from for seasonal lifeguard positions. With new technology, he also brought inflatable rescue boats to the department — an efficient tool Del Mar lifeguards still use today.

“I’m proud that I helped put the lifeguard department on a strong footing and kept it on a strong footing so it has persevered,” said Larson, who retired in 1998. “I think that we maintained a strong department by taking on as much responsibility as the city wanted to give us.”

Jumpstarting juniors

As Del Mar’s beach grew in popularity, so did the Del Mar Lifeguard Department.

Some of those lifeguards started with the Del Mar Junior Lifeguards, a program Stevens launched in the late 1960s. At the time, it was the only such program in the region.

Lifelong friends Earl H. Maas III, Brett Mattei and Robert “Chip” Shore all started as junior lifeguards.

“I loved lifeguarding,” said Mattei, a Solana Beach resident, who became a junior lifeguard when he was 9. At 16, he was the department’s youngest hire when he became a seasonal lifeguard in 1979 and worked his way up to lieutenant, now called deputy chief.

“I really had the bug.”

Although Mattei left lifeguarding in 1994, he credits his successful career to his experience at the department.

Through his department connections, Mattei was introduced to the Del Mar Rotary Club, which sponsored a scholarship, allowing him to study in Uppsala, Sweden. From there, Mattei went on to become a distinguished diplomat for more

than 20 years. He served in the U.S. Department of State with assignments all over the world, including Australia, the Caribbean, Canada, Iraq, Kosovo and West Africa.

“Lifeguarding taught me about service — service to others, service to the community, service to the nation,” said Mattei, 52, who retired last year.

Mattei, Maas and Shore shared a house as roommates while they studied at San Diego State.

Like Mattei, Maas and Shore also learned lifeguard skills at a young age.

A Del Mar native, Shore was a junior lifeguard for one year before he joined the department at 17. He served as a lifeguard for a decade.

“I loved spending time on the beach,” said 52-year-old Shore, who now lives in Sweden. “Working and living on the beach wasn’t really work. It was a lifestyle.”

Lifeguarding has not only been a lifestyle for Maas, but a family tradition.

At 10, Maas became a junior lifeguard, following in the footsteps of his father, the former lifeguard-turned-mayor who helped launch the department.

“I had no plans to be a lifeguard,” said Maas, a Del Mar native who now lives in Carmel Valley. “But I grew up in the water. I was surfing when I was 4. I was brought up watching the water ever since I was a kid.”

As a junior lifeguard, Maas, whose nickname is “Trip,” recalled working alongside lifeguards in the tower. Through the training program, junior lifeguards would observe lifeguards and conduct practice rescues.

The experience led Maas to become an intern, then a seasonal lifeguard. He continued working with the department through law school.

Now 53, Maas, serves as a judge for San Diego Superior Court. All three of his children have continued the family tradition and participated in the Del Mar Junior Lifeguards. His son Danny, 13, remains active in the program.

“He kind of has the same sparkle of the beach that I had and my dad had,” Maas said. “It’s been 50 years, and now I’m seeing the third generation of my family lifeguarding.”

A new chapter

Del Mar’s third and current captain, now called chief, began his lifeguard career at a young age as well.

At 17, Patrick Vergne started his career with the county in Solana Beach while still a junior at Torrey Pines High School. He joined the Del Mar department in 1981 and was appointed chief after Larson’s retirement.



Del Mar Lifeguards in 2014. — *Courtesy photo*

During his tenure, Vergne has continued the department’s tradition of excellence. In 50 years of service, there have been no drownings in guarded areas.

“The neatest thing about 50 years of lifeguarding in Del Mar is the record,” Maas said.

Added Shore, “It feels very good to know that you made a difference for somebody.”

Since the department’s inception, Vergne estimates 300 to 350 lifeguards have come and gone. Yet over five decades, there have only been three captains — and former Mayor Maas helped select them all.

In the beginning, Stevens was in charge of just five people. Today, Vergne maintains a staff of up to 60 during the peak season. Every year, Del Mar attracts more beachgoers. An estimated 2 million people visited the city’s coastline last summer.

“I stand in awe of the guards that are working there now,” Ross said. “They do a good job, and they have a lot on their plate.”

The former headquarters that Stevens and former Del Mar Fire Chief Jim Baker built at 17th Street and dedicated in 1969 has come and gone. After 43 years, the city opened its state-of-the-art Del Mar Lifeguard Beach Safety Center in 2012, thanks to donations from the community.



Del Mar Lifeguard Beach Safety Center. — *Courtesy photo*

Headquartered on 17th Street, the department also has towers at North Beach, 29th Street, 25th Street, 20th Street and 11th Street.

Each day, lifeguards establish and maintain safe swimming and surfing areas. They monitor environmental conditions, and post weather and surf updates.

To train for rescues, the department operates year-round cliff, swift water and scuba rescue teams. In addition, lifeguards cross-train with the Aerial Support to Regional Enforcement Agencies and the U.S. Coast Guard.

On average, Del Mar lifeguards handle 1,400 water-related rescues and 1,100 medical aids every year.

Marking a milestone

Former and current lifeguards will remember the department's roots while also focusing on the future during the annual Del Mar Lifeguard Dance Party Fundraiser June 27 at the Powerhouse Community Center. The public is invited to celebrate 50 years of lifeguard service to the city at the event, which will feature dinner, drinks, live music, dancing and a silent auction.

"It's a chance to reflect, and to think about old friends and mentors," Mattei said.

For more about the Del Mar Lifeguard Department, visit www.delmarlifeguard.com.