

Junior lifeguards learn lessons in life, life saving

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scene in 1992, when he and fellow lifeguard Harry Back, Alexandra's father, started the Junior Lifeguard program in Cape May.

"We thought it was time to teach young kids about being safe in the water," he said.

Mogck estimated that nearly half of today's CMBP membership trained as junior guards in Cape May. He also noted that the city's program may have been the first in South New Jersey. Currently, about 600 youngsters are enrolled in the program statewide and 5,000 are members nationally, according to the USLA.

Giorgio Steele, 16, a graduate of Cape May's program last year, is a first-year rookie on the CMBP — the only one on the roster. He works on Mogck Beach, a 467-foot stretch of beach right next to Beach Patrol headquarters at Grant Street that City Council named in honor of Mogck in 2012.

"I was a junior guard for seven years, from when I was 9 to 15," said Steele, whose father, Russell, was a Cape May lifeguard for 30 years. "Lifeguards were my role models. They were like friends to my brother and me on Cove Beach, always telling us new things about the tides, currents and what to look for in the water. I admired them a lot. It's nice now knowing that I get to help people stay safe and answer their questions."

"When I was a kid, there weren't a lot of things for young people, especially stuff about the ocean. You basically had to learn how to operate in the water on your own and your parents had to watch you all the time."



-CMBP Chief Buzz Mogck

A year younger than Steele, Gemma Marx just completed her sixth year of junior lifeguarding last week and has now aged out of the program. The summer resident hopes to qualify for a rookie slot on the CMBP next summer.

"One of the most important things I learned in this program was the importance of teamwork," she said. "It's like when you're practicing a rescue with a chain of people. If every person isn't doing their best, it just doesn't work."

Marx admits that some aspects of being a lifeguard still are a "little scary" for her but her skills and confidence have grown under the junior guards' leadership team.

"If I was swimming today and saw someone in trouble, I would definitely try to help," she said.

Lt. Pete Pietras runs Cape May's Junior Lifeguard program, assisted by veteran guards who also serve as instructors. A lifeguard on Cape May Point's beaches for 26 years, many of them as chief there, Pietras took over Cape May's junior guards program six years ago. He also founded the

youth program in Cape May Point.

Developed by the USLA, the Junior Lifeguard program promotes water and beach safety, working together as a team, fitness and good health, and respect for the ocean.

"Whether the kids are running, paddle boarding or practicing a rescue, our primary focus in everything we teach them is safety," Pietras explained.

Seventy-five youngsters enrolled in the CMBP program this summer. Classes were held Tuesday and Thursday mornings in July. Participants were divided into three age groups, 9-11, 12-13 and 14-15, and assigned activities that were age-appropriate.

"The instructors know what the kids' capabilities are and encourage them to extend their abilities, but they never force a kid or put them in harm's way," Pietras said.

"The youngest group is definitely the most fun," remembers Marx, who moved up through all three levels. "They get to play a lot of games, and they never get tired."

Training is more intense for the older set.

"It's more physical be-

cause we're getting them ready for actual lifeguarding," said program instructor Brian Ruane, a 10-year veteran with the CMBP and an award-winning competitive paddler. Ruane also started as a junior guard.

"It's great to see how the kids mature," Pietras said. "You see them on their first day and on their last day, and by then, you can see that they've learned the tricks, like how to place their body on a paddleboard so that they can move faster through the water."

"Three of our junior guards just medaled in the Mid-Atlantic Junior Lifeguard competition in Wildwood," he related proudly. "They were in a four-person relay race — the other runner was from Wildwood — and they came in fourth."

Cape May's Junior Lifeguard program continues to earn national recognition.

"Its programs are an integral part of building a safety network for our nation's beach lifesaving programs and contribute to the growth of our lifeguards and leaders of tomorrow," the USLA's Davis said. "Cape May lifeguards have a long and storied history, and their Junior Lifeguard program is an excellent example of instilling our profession's values of discipline, humanitarianism and public service."

Davis' day job is chief of the beach patrol on another island, Galveston Island in Texas.

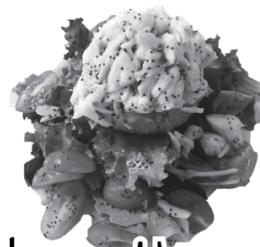
Going back to that foot

race on the last day of class, the end of that story is that as soon as the runners reached the flag, their entire group totally engulfed them, hooting and high-fiving their congratulations to both contestants and teams. It was like they

had all won the race. It was an amazing display of sportsmanship. By all accounts, Cape May's Junior Lifeguard program makes everyone on the island — kids, families and beachgoers — winners every day.

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