

Jerry Cunningham

Even though he was 86, family and friends were surprised to learn Jerry Cunningham died February 5 of a heart attack. But they were not surprised to learn the heart attack occurred in the locker room at South End Racquet and Health Club, following one of his three-day-a-week swim workouts.

Cunningham had been a Los Angeles County lifeguard for 38 years, an alternate on the 1952 U.S. Olympic water polo team, a world champion body surfer in his age group at 65 and had competed in the Two-Mile Dwight Crum Pier to Pier Swim from the age of 40 until he turned 76 in 2005. (The swim is named after Cunningham's friend and former fellow lifeguard captain Dwight Crum.)

A lifeguard memorial service in Cunningham's honor will be held Saturday, May 7 at 10 a.m. at Torrance Beach.

In 1982, Cunningham became the only Los Angeles County lifeguard to rise through the ranks from working a beach tower to becoming Director of the Los Angeles County Department of Beaches. But just two years later, in 1984, he abruptly quit, according to former lifeguard Lieutenant Bob Burnside, because he tired of the county politics.

"Jerry and I were very political," recalled Burnside, inventor of the iconic Burnside Rescue Can. "He was president of the lifeguard association and I was a union steward. Our chief, Bud Stevenson, told us one day, 'You two are good in the surf. But you need to be the whole enchilada. You need to be the ladders that make lifeguarding a professional service.'"

During his years as president of the lifeguard association and then Director of the Department of Beaches, Cunningham was instrumental in the creation of the beach bike path, installing beach bathrooms, establishing the lifeguard paramedic program, opening access to private beaches and merging the Santa Monica Lifeguards with the Los Angeles County Lifeguards.

‘We tried to get Long Beach, as well. Their lifeguards wanted to join us, but the politicians blocked it,’ Burnside said.

One of Cunningham’s most important projects, Burnside said, was the creation of the Department of Beaches.

“After World War II, the lifeguards were put under County Parks and Recreation and we were always getting the old trucks and old crap. Bud Stevenson did a lot to support Supervisor Burton Chase and convinced him to make lifeguards their own department. So, in 1969 Chase got the votes on the board to create the Department of Beaches.”

Redondo Beach Chamber of Commerce manager Dick Fitzgerald was named the new department’s first director. Cunningham was named assistant director. When Fitzgerald became ill in 1982, Cunningham succeeded him.

“Two years later Jerry called me to say he was retiring. Chase had died in a car accident and the County Board of Supervisors wanted to put the lifeguards under the Department of Harbors,” Burnside said. “Jerry said he just wasn’t ready for another big political battle.”

Burnside attributed the 1982 Department of Beaches merger with the Department of Harbors to the lifeguards’ fight for beach access.

“Wealthy beach property owners were disgruntled because of the bicycle paths, restrooms and eminent domain procedures we used to improve public access. Under the guise of consolidation, the Department of Beaches was placed under the Department of Harbors, a department more sympathetic to private property owners,” Burnside said.

Burnside recalled accompanying Cunningham to Sacramento one year to lobby for lifeguard benefits equal to what police and fire received.

“One of the Northern California legislators said, ‘I see what lifeguards do on the Russian River and you’re not entitled to police and fire benefits.’”

“Jerry had an Irish temper and I thought he’d blown it when he told the politician he didn’t know what he was talking about and that ocean lifeguards risked their lives 12 months a year rescuing swimmers, boaters and airplane passengers. Jerry won the day.”

Including the day of his death, Cunningham attended daily Mass at St. Lawrence Martyrs Catholic Church, near his Hollywood Riviera home. During retirement he and his wife Gerrie were members of the church’s Marriage Encounter Team and he taught matrimony classes at Bishop Montgomery High School.

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