

Chief Lifeguard

Don Rohrer

By ADAM SANDLER

When news that Don Rohrer had passed away reached the mainland, the reaction of surprise was universal. His closest friends and lifeguard colleagues had no idea he was ill, and many suggested that Don probably wouldn't have told anyone that he was.

Rohrer, who retired as Chief Lifeguard of L.A. County in May 1996, passed away April 30 at age 82, after a brief illness. He died in his sleep at his home in Princeville, HI. on the island of Kauai.

“As a Chief, Don was always more interested in how you were doing — and making you feel better — than talking about whatever problems he may have been dealing with,” recalls Gary Crum, a family friend, and a retired LA County Section Chief who worked with Rohrer. “That mindset didn't change - even after he retired.”

Rohrer was a founding member of the National Surf Lifesaving Assoc. (the precursor to the United States Lifesaving Assoc.) in 1964 and served as USLA President from 1998 to 2003. He retired after 44 years of service as a lifeguard, which began in 1952 with the City of Los Angeles.

During his rise through the ranks, and then as Chief, Rohrer oversaw many improvements to the profession of lifeguarding. He later was instrumental in transitioning L.A County's Ocean Lifeguards into the L.A. County Fire Department in 1994.

Rohrer became LA County's Chief Lifeguard in April 1990 and is widely credited with elevating the professional standards of the ocean lifeguard by expanding training programs to include EMT and Swift Water Rescue Certifications, and emergency vehicle driving, to name a few.

His experience as a dive team member and Rescue Boat Chief, led to overseeing the upgrading of the County's fleet with better engines and marine firefighting equipment. Rohrer also emphasized educating the public on beach safety, and required his lifeguards to project a positive, professional public image.

So it was particularly grating to Rohrer when a group of LA County Lifeguards — including National Champion Ocean Lifeguard Craig Hummer — spoofed Ocean Lifeguards during an appearance on “The David Letterman Show” with what some

considered a demeaning “Top 10” list of things ocean lifeguards say to female beachgoers.

“They set back the reputation of lifeguards 50-years,” Rohrer said months after the airing of the segment. He said he never saw the show, but nonetheless suspended Hummer for three weeks. The Chief asserted the lifeguards inappropriately appeared in uniform and on lifeguard trucks. Rohrer’s reaction probably could have been anticipated. Colleagues frequently pointed out that Rohrer expected his lifeguards to take pride in their work, and always behave professionally.

“He was proud of the lifeguards he worked with, the profession, and he appreciated a job well-done. And he would tell you,” recalls retired Lifeguard/ Paramedic Joel Gitelson. “But when he saw something he didn’t like; he was also a straight-shooter about that.”

Gitelson recalls a time when Rohrer placed a gold medal around his neck for a first-place finish at a Lifesaving World Championships. “As he was putting the medal around my neck, he said ‘I am so proud of you, Joel.’ I never forgot that. That was who he was.”

Colleagues of Rohrer’s are quick to use phrases like “Chief’s-Chief” “Level-headed” “Decisive” and “Strong” when they characterize him.

“From my rookie year at Cabrillo, Don and I got along great. He was easy to work for,” reflects retired Lifeguard Captain/Paramedic Kenny Atkins, whose Paramedic School graduation in September, 1985 Rohrer attended as head of the Rescue Boats. (see photo). “He was a man’s-man. The profession will miss him.”

Rohrer also was well-known to local media.

When he retired, the L.A Times called Rohrer “undoubtedly the prototype for David Hasselhoff’s Lt. Mitch Buchannon,” referring to the “Baywatch” TV show and its main character. “Rohrer is dry-docking his paddle boat and stowing his rescue can. He is 60 and can still swim around the Venice Pier in about 12 minutes or take 10 to do 500 meters in a pool. After 44 years, he has saved an estimated 2,000 drowning swimmers,” the Times wrote in 1996.

On his last day, Rohrer made the rounds to all the section headquarters to pay his respects and say farewell to the lifeguards.

Rohrer’s retirement party at the Santa Monica Museum of Flying on May 30, 1996 boasted more than 350 lifeguards celebrating his career and his dedication to lifesaving.

“It was huge,” recall Gitelson. “He was so liked and respected, and everyone wanted to wish him well.”

Equally well-attended was the final salute to Rohrer at his Celebration of Life, held June 23 on Dockweiler Beach.

“Do not have a memorial for me. Do not!” Rohrer was quoted by retired Section Chief Mickey Gallagher in his eulogy during the Celebration.

An order everyone gladly disobeyed.

Rohrer is survived by his wife (Dr.) Bev, of 49 years, two sons Jeff and Matt, and several grandchildren.

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