

Remembering Tom Coveleski

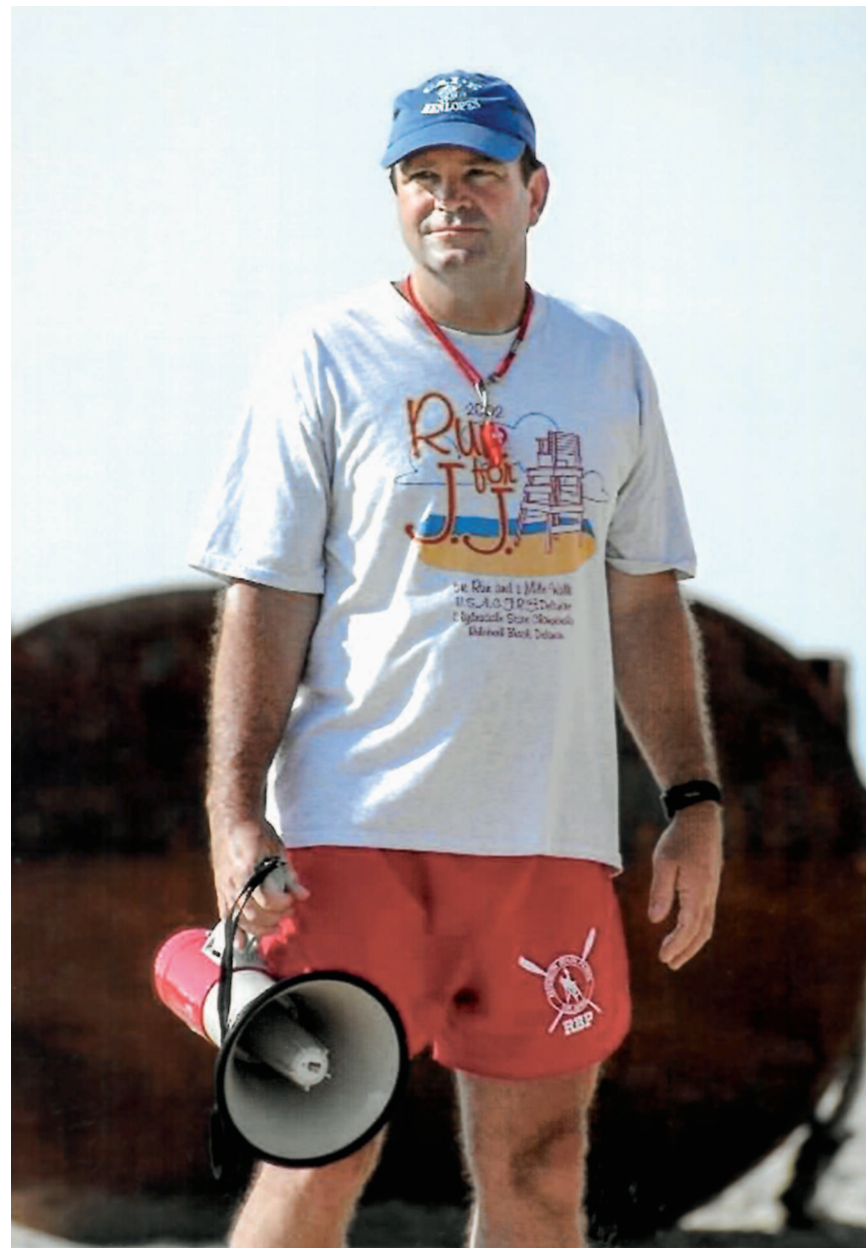
A lifesaving visionary who made room for all

BY JIM HELLER, MARK MARDERWALD AND PETE HARTSOCK

Most people never have the opportunity to meet a saint, or simply do not look carefully enough to see them walking among us. This does not mean they don't exist. We who knew former Rehoboth Beach Patrol Chief Tom Coveleski were the lucky few; not only to have met a saint, but to have called him our friend, mentor and lifesaver (to paraphrase writer Lori Corkum).

Tom Coveleski, known as "TC," was a pillar of Rehoboth Beach and one of the last remaining icons of an older generation of lifesaving — which emphasized public safety, lifesaver well-being and community building. For 37 years, TC dedicated his heart and soul to building a lifesaving utopia. TC's utopia embodied the definition of the word Rehoboth, which means "room for all," from the book of Genesis.

During TC's time on the RBP, he contributed in a number of prodigious ways to one of the longest perfect safety records of any beach patrol in the nation (77 years



Veteran Rehoboth Beach lifeguard Tom Coveleski, who served as chief, led his beach patrol by example, with scores of rescues to his credit. "TC," as he was called, was "soft-spoken and modest, but he was a radiant leader with an uncanny ability to inspire," say his former lieutenants who wrote this tribute. >

without a drowning). Eventually, TC became the longest-serving chief and longest-serving member of the RBP — Delaware's and the Delmarva Peninsula's oldest such patrol, which will celebrate its 95th birthday this year.

He served as an outstanding diplomat for the City of Rehoboth Beach and for lifesaving as a profession. TC's greatest strength was in creating a place where community members and lifesavers wanted to live and work. He did not produce cookie-cutter lifesavers or discriminate against any community member. Instead, TC accepted and developed ocean lifeguards from very diverse backgrounds, so long as they were wholly dedicated to saving lives and building a positive community.


TC's ocean rescue career really started when he was very young, when he would shadow his father in his own lifesaving mission. TC's father was the legendary Frank "Coach" Coveleski, who led the RBP for decades — from the early 1950s — and who revolutionized lifesaving on the Delmarva Peninsula. Frank introduced a system of two lifeguards per every 110 yards of beach and he was also wise enough to grasp that lifeguarding is not just about athletics, but also intelligence, close teamwork, and excellent communications.

Frank pioneered the "cover down" system whereby no beach was left unguarded if lifeguards on particular beaches had to go in for rescues. He also brought in telephones (the hard-wired kind) to every guarded beach in Rehoboth back in the early 1950s, long before radios, let alone phones, came into common use by lifeguards. This meant that the RBP guards were not distracted from watching the water during vital communications with each other and with headquarters.

Frank fought hard for the welfare of his lifeguards and TC continued that commitment for decades after his father's death. As most lifeguards know, dealing with town hall can sometimes be frustrating. But TC had his father's sense of diplomacy and a similar full investment of himself in caring for his guards and serving public safety well. That special combination was transmitted to many lifesavers, including those who went on to head other beach patrols on the Delmarva Peninsula.

Having served as TC's lieutenants, we watched TC grow as a lifeguard and leader, eventually shaping the destiny of countless peers and younger community members. >

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Tom Coveleski coached Little League baseball for 25 years. Devoted to kids, he also started a youth recreation program in Rehoboth and the Rehoboth Beach Patrol Junior Lifeguard Program.

In the 1972 RBP rookie test (which ran for five hours with no rest), TC came in second, finishing far ahead of 16 other rookies. That was a strong indication of things to come for this remarkable guy.

Not long after TC started guarding, he established a pioneering youth recreation program for kids in Rehoboth, keeping countless numbers of youngsters off the streets and away from drugs and alcohol. He fought hard to initiate and manage that program, which won the full support of the town, educators and law enforcement. The program became an acclaimed model for other resorts. In the mid-1990s, TC also created the Rehoboth Beach Patrol Junior Lifeguard program, which has grown to nearly 100 participants a year.

Many people in Rehoboth remember TC as the nicest man on the beach and a champion of community members of all shapes, sizes and ages. Former RBP Lieutenant Kelly Cannon recounts an incident in TC's early lifesaving career that reflected his open-mindedness and big heart. When Kelly was a first-year lifeguard, TC "told some of the crew that they were going to a party. The younger lifeguards were immediately excited, thinking there would be girls there. [But] it wasn't that type of party." Instead, it was a dance for disabled kids, and TC had volunteered

lifeguards as companions for the attendees. "That's the guy TC was. He gave me my first exposure to people with disabilities," said Kelly in a *Daily Times* interview. Both TC and Kelly went on to become respected and beloved teachers of physically and mentally disabled students.

TC's brother Dr. Peter Coveleski puts it best when he says, "TC was the ultimate community member. In addition to TC's youth recreation program, he was asked by our father to help out with coaching Little League baseball for a year and he ended up staying on to coach for 25 years." Even though TC was generally the only guy coaching without a child of his own on a team, the unspoken allegorical truth was that these were all TC's children.

Former RBP Lieutenant Dave Frederick said in a *Cape Gazette* article, "TC saw our place in the oil painting of the coastal community. He was a soul without attitude, emotionally steady beyond comprehension. People loved Tommy because he loved them first; he was the ultimate enabler and enhancer of all things that made 'you' unique."

TC was fast as lightning on both land and in the sea; he had the endurance of a marathon runner, and the ability to teach everyone he met through his actions alone. He was often first on the scene on

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the 2-mile stretch of Rehoboth's guarded beach. Whether physically rescuing swimmers or using his binoculars and radio to alert closer guards to precarious situations, TC was always there and always aware.

It was almost as if TC had a sixth-sense awareness of imperiled swimmers, routinely directing the RBP guards like an air-traffic controller. From the northernmost to the southernmost beach of Rehoboth, from the doldrum days of 100-degree heat to the hurricane days of 10-foot waves, TC seemed to constantly keep track of every lifeguard and every incident.

TC was generally soft-spoken and modest, but he was a radiant leader with an uncanny ability to inspire. "He was a steadfast gentle hand and voice who somehow knew, without asking, the fears, doubts and joys you were experiencing and always had quiet words of wisdom to guide you through," says Sonja Friend-Uhl, former RBP lifesaver. TC's colleague Vivian Bush adds in *The Daily Times*, "He was a one-of-a-kind person because of the way he spoke. ...No matter the situation, he was always looking at the glass half-full. He was so positive about people."

Unless asked, he rarely mentioned his scores of rescues in perilous conditions, his perfect safety record, his leadership, or the vast impact he had on building and sustaining the vibrant beach community of Rehoboth.

His leadership was the best sort. Not in-your-face, not fearmongering, nor intimidation. TC was a master at getting people to do something because they wanted to do it. Former RBP Lieutenant Logan Short said, "TC was the greatest — educating, praising, motivating and leading in his own special way."

TC gave his heart and soul to lifesaving and community building, and even after a sad diagnosis of stomach cancer a few years ago, he still fought on. He continued

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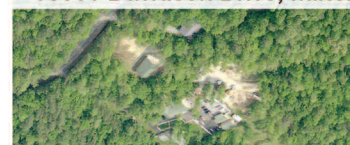
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teaching at a school for disabled pupils, competed in long-distance races and mentored kids as he had been doing for decades.

With this kind of record, not to mention hundreds of rescues to his credit, TC could have become extremely vain. But, like his father, vanity was not for TC. He had strong moral and physical courage, which made him a special role model for lifeguards and other members of the community. That courage translated into “Acta, non verba” (“Deeds, not words”).

“TC was the heart and soul of generations of the Rehoboth Beach Patrol, a truly great human being who effortlessly left an impression on so many.”

Though Tom Coveleski died on Feb. 1, the memories of his deeds have been indelibly captured in the hearts and minds of countless people in Rehoboth Beach and beyond. These memories form the basis of a lifesaving and community utopia, where there was “room for all,” inspired and built by TC, his family and the countless numbers of people they encouraged.

A true utopia never dies, even if it merely lives on in the minds of those who envision it. While the Rehoboth Beach Patrol may never be the same without TC, in the hearts of those who crossed paths with him, this brilliant place — Rehoboth, with room for all — will live on.

“TC was the heart and soul of generations of the Rehoboth Beach Patrol, a truly great human being who effortlessly left an impression on so many,” says former RBP lifesaver, Jared Tootell.

Navy SEAL and former RBP Lieutenant Dave Dillehay sums it up this way:

“Rest in Peace, TC. You made the world a better place by making everyone you met a better person.” ■

The writers are former lieutenants of the Rehoboth Beach Patrol. JIM HELLER is now a lawyer. DR. PETE HARTSOCK is a long-serving captain at the National Institutes of Health. MARK MARDERWALD is a stock trader.

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