

Western Leader



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YOUR PLACE, YOUR PAPER

Still on guard at 70

By NICOLA MURPHY

IT WAS 53 years ago but Brian Webber remembers one of his most devastating rescues like it was yesterday.

Three trampers got caught around Lion Rock at Piha and one drowned as he tried to rescue them.

Mr Webber, a 17-year-old junior lifeguard at the time, says the conditions were "horrendous". But the experience didn't put him off and the 70-year-old is still patrolling Piha Beach.

Mr Webber is the oldest serving lifeguard at Piha Surf Life Saving Club and will be on duty again this summer. Lifeguard patrol season has started and continues until mid-April.

Piha surf lifesavers perform an average of 109 rescues a year.

The average for all west coast beaches is around 245 a year across Piha, Muriwai, Bethells and Karekare.

Mr Webber says it gets "terribly frustrating" rescuing people who have made silly mistakes but it's just part of the job.

"People don't realise how quickly the conditions can change."

Surf Life Saving New Zealand spokesman Andy Kent says it's important people swim between the flags and know their limits. Always check when lifeguards are on patrol and only swim during these times.

"If you're not a confident swimmer, don't go in the water," he says.

"Lifeguards are experts on the area so listening to them is in your best interests."

When I started there was nothing in the way of automated boats to go and make a rescue. Instead we just had a reel with 400 yards of rope.

Brian Webber

Mr Kent says tourists and new immigrants who are unfamiliar with the conditions should be extra careful.

"That's when signs really help, often in symbols for non-English speakers. We just encourage people to be aware of their surroundings," he says.

Mr Webber divides his time between Piha and Glendowie and has seen a lot of changes in his time as a volunteer.

"When I started there was nothing in the way of automated boats to go and make a rescue," he says.

"Instead we just had a reel with 400 yards of rope and a belt made of canvas which you put over your head."

The father-of-two has seen equipment change from a surfboard and surf skis to inflatable rubber and jet boards.

He finds it difficult to keep fit for the job as he gets older - particularly swimming 400 metres in less than nine minutes which is required of all lifeguards.

"It's not as easy when you're 70 as when you're 17," he says.

But Mr Webber plans to keep patrolling as long as he's able.



Endurance: Piha's oldest patrolling lifeguard Brian Webber says it's not as easy to keep fit compared to when he was 17.

Photo: NICOLA MURPHY

TARGETING WATER SAFETY

A new programme to teach survival swimming, beach and surf safety in west Auckland is being launched today.

Wai Wise is running at West Wave Aquatic Centre in Henderson. It targets those aged 15 to 25 from Maori, Asian and Pacific Island communities because these groups have the highest drowning statistics in Waitakere.

The programme will also work with groups including the Village Sports Academy and Chinese New Settlers Services Trust to offer practical and theoretical

water safety sessions and swimming lessons.

Participants on the swimming courses will also try a variety of aquatic sport and recreation activities including waka ama and surf lifesaving.

Wai Wise is a collaboration between Watersafe Auckland, Sport Waitakere, Safe Waitakere and Surf Life Saving New Zealand and is free for participants.

Maori, Asian and Pacific Island community groups wanting to get involved in Wai Wise can call Stacey Willcox on 306-0809.

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