

Death sounds an 'alarm bell' for ocean safety

Year later, there's change ashore

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Photos by Dana Rene Bowler / Star staff Sue Barry champions for more education on ocean safety. Her husband, Tim Barry, drowned last year during a rescue of his 4-year-old grandniece, who was swept off a rock jetty by heavy waves on the beach in Ventura.

Before tragedy struck, Sue Barry didn't give much thought to the rock jetty outside her Ventura beach house.

It was sturdy, rugged, an important outcropping installed to slow erosion of the shore. Fishermen climbed its banks all the time to sling their lines.

"I wouldn't have thought twice about going on the jetty," she said.

That irrevocably changed Dec. 26 of last year when her husband, Tim, 54, a popular neighborhood activist, drowned rescuing his 4-year-old grandniece who had been swept off the jetty and pulled underwater by a crush of waves.

Since then, life has been difficult for Sue Barry, who still lives in a house marked with the stuff of a long, happy marriage, but drained of life since Tim's death.

Through regular counseling and a supportive network of friends, relatives and co-workers, Barry has emerged from a blanket of grief. There are rough days when tears still flow. But they are matched by good days, when she's optimistic about the future.

She also continues to champion for greater education on ocean safety.

"Every time I now see children and adults on the rocks, I shudder to think if they were to fall," she said. "Visitors oftentimes don't know the risks. It's up to all of us to educate them."

The neighborhood has changed, too.

Tim Barry's drowning and growing concerns about beach safety triggered a fundraising effort and partnership among residents in the Pierpont Beach neighborhood, state park representatives and city officials to add lifeguard towers and improve safety along the neighborhood's scenic but occasionally treacherous shoreline.

Three towers were installed this summer for the first time in decades. Lifeguards in those towers rescued more than 100 swimmers and gave medical aid to more than 600 beachgoers by summer's end, state officials said.

Looming state budget cuts and a cash-strapped city budget threaten the towers' return. It will cost roughly \$75,000 to operate three towers during daylight hours seven days a week from late June through Labor Day, then weekends through September.

Despite complaints about placement of the towers and new enforcement of long-standing rules barring dogs on the beach, local and state officials have come to view the lifeguard towers as a vital community service that should be preserved and reduced only as a last resort.

In the meantime, officials are about to flood local hotels and tourist spots with door hangers providing ocean safety tips in English and Spanish. This spring, every fourth-grader in public and private schools in the city will receive a bookmark with ocean safety lessons to go with classroom safety presentations, officials said.

"Tim's death was the alarm bell that something more had to be done," said Rich Rojas, a state park district superintendent who had befriended Tim Barry through his years of volunteer work.

To Rojas, the city, beach residents and state agency have "made a commitment" to the towers and to better educate people about the lurking dangers.

"We weren't doing enough," said Murray Robertson, a Pierpont Beach resident and activist who has endorsed an idea to charge for parking at Marina Park during summer to help pay for lifeguard services. "Tim's death shook us all. And no one wants something like that to ever happen again."

12-foot waves

What shook many residents was that Tim Barry's death happened so fast.

According to family, witnesses and law enforcement accounts, the little girl and her mother, who was seven months pregnant, were walking on a portion of the rock jetty on the beach. They were swept up around 11 a.m. by a rogue wave that encroached far upon shore.

The waves were unusually high that day, up to 12 feet by some estimates.

The 24-year-old mother, Breanna Barry, was able to get back to the beach, but little Priscilla could not.

Tim Barry heard the mother's screams as the wave hit, ran down the jetty and jumped into the water, immediately kicking and paddling to take the girl away from the rocks, witnesses said.

Barry held her in his hands above his head for several minutes as powerful waves crashed over his back, witnesses said. His brother, Dan, tried to swim to his granddaughter but was hit by the powerful water and had to turn back.

Adam English of Ventura was walking on the beach when he came to the jetty where Barry and the girl were struggling to get to shore.

Barry was floating face down and the girl was clutching his motionless body by the time English reached them, said the experienced swimmer, who worked in his youth as a lifeguard. English was able to grab the girl and bring her back to shore.

Lifeguards and a Ventura city rescue swimmer arrived and it took them several minutes to locate Barry in the churning whitewater and bring him to shore. Paramedics on the beach worked to resuscitate him as a crowd of hundreds watched.

He was taken by ambulance to Ventura County Medical Center, where he was pronounced dead. He drowned, officials later determined.

Because of budget constraints and typically little public activity, there are no lifeguard towers on the beach in front of homes during winter, state parks Lt. Jack Futoran said. Ocean deaths remain rare on Ventura's popular shoreline, with no more than two or three a year, and seldom in the winter.

The U.S. Lifesaving Association announced this month it would award Tim Barry a posthumous honor for heroism. Barry also was bestowed a citizen's medal of merit from the Ventura County Professional Peace Officers Association, which hangs on the wall in Sue Barry's living room.

The light of her life

Tim Barry was the light of his wife's life.

"They could just talk to each other for hours," said Sue's son, Josh Kellim, 26, a budding chef. "I always admired them for that."

A talented cameraman, Tim Barry worked on movie sets and for television.



Pierpont Beach resident Sue Barry keeps a photograph of her husband and herself on her work badge so Tim stays "close to my heart."

The two met in 1989 when she lived in Los Angeles and he was in Oxnard. Both were divorced single parents. Acting on a friend's referral, she called him for a date, the first guy she had ever asked out. The chemistry was immediate. His passions were movies, cooking and music. He was confident, with a dry sense of humor.

"He was my soul mate," Sue Barry said.

She moved to Ventura County the following year. They married Oct. 28, 1995, eloping to Lake Tahoe.

Tim Barry served as vice chairman of the Pierpont Community Council, an all-volunteer neighborhood group. He often acted as a liaison for the council with City Hall and state parks officials. He had been a consistent advocate for cleaner beaches and more stringent controls on rental properties in the Pierpont area, having picked up a side job as a property manager in recent years.

After his death, Sue Barry fell into a deep depression. She started grief counseling. It took a few months before she could return to her job in the county's Human Services Agency. Even then, waves of sadness would pummel her.

"My co-workers would hug me and let me cry," she said.

She stuck with the counseling and started attending laughter yoga in Camarillo. "I take myself a little lighter now," she said. "It felt so good to laugh again. I always liked to laugh."

Another breakthrough came in August when she left the safe confines of home and traveled alone to Pelican Rapids, Minn., where she worked with the international service group Global Volunteers. The group helps refugee children from as far away as Somalia and Bosnia learn conversational English.

"I'm sure Tim would have been glad I did it," she said. "He would have encouraged me."

Sue Barry spent Christmas with a throng of relatives and in-laws in Northern California, including Breanna, who gave birth last spring to a healthy baby boy, and little Priscilla, now 5 and precocious, she said.

She never seriously considered leaving the family home on Bangor Lane, though it took months before she could comfortably go back on the beach. Now she visits a small memorial left for Tim in the sand, the rock jetty protruding into the ocean only yards away.

"I feel like I have a purpose again," she said. "I feel stronger."