



SENTINELS OF THE SURF

Hawaiian Rotarians save lives with rescue tubes

During a family vacation to the Hawaiian island of Kauai in early 2010, Cornelius “Woody” Peeples, an emergency room doctor from Oregon, was tidying up after a picnic when another beach goer pointed to a boy struggling in the surf. Peeples’ son Jack, then 10, had entered the water despite the “shore-pounding waves the size of city buses,” he says. Before he could do anything, his 12-year-old son, Connor, got in to aid Jack but also became trapped, dis-

appearing from view under 10-foot swells. “I ran and shouted to see whether anyone had anything that floats,” Peeples recalls. “Some young guy threw a rescue tube into my arms.”

Peeples rushed into the ocean with the flotation device. Reaching Jack, he pulled the boy toward the cliffs and heaved him up onto the craggy rocks. “By a miracle I saw Connor 15 or 20 feet away, so I climbed the rocks and tossed the rescue tube on a long tether. He got

hold of it, and I pulled him onto the wall,” the father says. The steep rock face and huge waves kept them stranded there in an hours-long ordeal that would eventually involve a Zodiac raft, a Jet Ski, and a helicopter. Peeples hails the bravery of the rescue personnel, but he also credits that piece of foam rubber with their survival.

“If I hadn’t had that rescue tube, I wouldn’t have been able to stay afloat long enough, to keep Jack close

enough,” he says. “It took a lot of time to find a handhold on the rocks, and I had to ride waves. I couldn’t have done that without that tube. In these cases, what you need is some kind of flotation, and rescue tubes are ideal.”

That lifeline had been placed on Hanakapiai Beach by the Kauai Lifeguard Association – a nonprofit led by Monty Downs, also an ER doctor – with a major assist from Rotarians who funded dozens of the devices begin-

ning in 2008. Two years later, Branch Lotspeich and John Gillen, both members of the Rotary Club of Hanalei Bay (Princeville-At-Hanalei) on Kauai's northern coast, formed the Rescue Tube Foundation.

"We were just nickel-and-diming it, with whoever I could get to help out," Downs recalls. "But Rotary jumped in quickly and powerfully with funding support, and then Branch and John took it to a whole other level." The duo showed ingenuity in fabricating the plastic poles used to anchor the rescue tube stations into sand or rock, in providing training, and in making the tube systems transportable and readily available for purchase.

"They're 4 inches thick, 6 inches wide, and 50 inches tall with a buoyancy that can support three adults," Lotspeich says. The tubes are manufactured in China and purchased from a Chicago company that customizes the devices with silkscreened instructions designed by Michael Somers, another Hanalei Bay Rotarian and a graphic artist. Volunteer Rotarians, Lions, and others assemble the mounting stations in Kauai.

"We provide the complete rescue tube stations for \$90 each to Rotary clubs that want to install them," Lotspeich says. "Rescue tubes save lives, and any Rotary club in the world can install these things."

"These are not theoretical saves – these are real saves," Gillen adds. So far, about 240 rescue tubes have been planted on Kauai, and the effort has



Clockwise from opposite page: A rescue tube stands guard at Rock Quarry Beach on the north shore of Kauai. In January 2012, Hanalei Bay Rotarians, family members, and friends met up to install 22 rescue tubes. Branch Lotspeich works on a special tool he designed to simplify the installation of rescue tube mounting poles.

spread to the Big Island of Hawaii, Maui, and points beyond. Dozens of rescues have been documented.

"When John and I started this foundation, our interest was in expanding it first to the rest of Hawaii, then to the mainland, and then, unabashedly, worldwide – any place where there is recreational water, whether it's an ocean, a lake, a stone quarry, a swimming hole, rivers. There are thousands and thousands of miles of shoreline in the United States that are swimming or fishing areas," Lotspeich says.

The Rotary Club of South Hilo has installed about 30 rescue tube stations, with the blessing of county parks and

public safety officials, says club member Audrey Wilson. "Every year we're using our fundraising money to buy more." The Alex and Duke De Rego Foundation, devoted to water safety and first aid, is working to ensure that every beach on the Big Island has a rescue tube, and in October purchased dozens of them from the Rescue Tube Foundation. "We've put them in places where the need is greatest. Anything to promote ocean safety," says Shirley De Rego, whose son Alexander drowned off the island of Kona in 2005. (Another son, Duke, died in 2010 after being thrown from a golf cart.) Back on Kauai, the local Lions club has joined the

effort, buying 24 tubes from the Rescue Tube Foundation. Area resorts are also among the foundation's partners.

Lotspeich aims to develop standards that could be employed worldwide. Small things matter: The two men determined that changing the color to yellow from red increases the tubes' visibility and longevity. The foundation, the lifeguard group, and Rotarians work together to handle the monitoring, maintenance, and replacement of the tubes.

"The whole rescue tube program, with the guys from Rotary to Monty Downs, is a commendable thing," Peebles says. "We're alive because of it."

– BRAD WEBBER