

Surfing for Life

BY LYNN R. PARKS | PHOTOGRAPH BY NICK GRUBER

From his teenage years on, catching a wave was more than just a thrill for Gary Revel. When a heart attack brought that to a halt, he had to heal to surf again. But in healing, he had to share his story about being beckoned by death.

Gary Revel, who started surfing at age 9 and became one of the best surfers in the area, was driven off the waves by a near-death experience and subsequent health issues. He is now back in the water, here at the Indian River Inlet, where he first rode a surfboard more than 50 years ago.



Gary Revel stands with his surfboard on the beach at the Indian River Inlet, just as the sun is coming up over the horizon. This is the beach where Revel first learned the sport when he was 9 years old; he still likes to ride waves there.

A couple years ago, Gary Revel and his son Michael loaded up their surfboards and headed from their home near Ocean View to Assateague Island, south of Ocean City, Md. Gary, who in his teens and 20s was considered by many to be the best surfer in coastal Delaware, hadn't been out on the water in a while. But Michael had a new board and was eager to try it. "I'd been promising Michael all summer that I'd go out with him," says Gary. "Reports were that the waves were small and gentle that day, a good day to get back into things."

But the trip didn't go as planned. "We got there and the waves were a little bigger than I thought they were going to be," Gary recalls. He sat on the beach for a while, watching his son ride the waves. Finally, he carried his board to the water and headed out into the ocean. And Michael, who was nearby, saw the look of anxiety on his dad's face. "He paddled out to me and said that I didn't look very good," Gary recalls. "The waves really weren't very big, but when he asked if I wanted to go in to shore, I was like, 'Yeah.' I caught a wave and rode in on my belly. And then I just sat on the beach with my head in my hands."

Photograph by Carolyn Watson



Gary Revel's legendary surfing career started with this 9-foot-4-inch Hobie board that he received as a Christmas present in 1965.

Last summer, father and son made a second trip to Assateague. A storm had swept up the coast a couple of days before and reports this time were calling for large waves, much taller than they had been on the pair's earlier trip.

When they got to the beach, "we stood there, watching them for a while," Gary says of the "pretty big" waves that day. "Then we put our wetsuits on and walked down to the water. Michael got ready to jump in, I was standing there waxing my board, and he turned around and asked me, 'Am I going to see you out there?'"

Gary nodded and Michael, reassured, went ahead.

Gary paddled into the water. "The waves were pushing double overhead, twice our size plus. Michael kept staring at me, watching to see how I'd do. The first big set came through and I started paddling toward it. He was watching me the whole time — I knew that he was thinking that I couldn't paddle forever, that I would eventually have to turn around. And then I turned around and took off on the first wave."

Gary rode the rush of water all the way

Photograph courtesy of Gary Revel

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to the shore. When he got there, Michael was right behind. “He had been watching me the whole time, and when I turned around and surfed that wave, he was happier than I was,” Gary says.

Now, a year later, the elder Revel surfs every chance he gets. The anxiety that first started in 2003, after he suffered a near-fatal heart attack, and that sent him back to shore during that first trip to Assateague, still surfaces now and then, but not to the extent that it did.

“I’m as involved in surfing now as much as I ever was,” says Gary, 66. “I surfed through the whole past winter, and I was always the oldest person in the water.”

He’s not quite certain what caused the change. He lost weight, about 25 pounds, stopped drinking beer, and stopped taking medications that he felt were making his anxiety worse. But he feels that in the end, his desire for calm along with the sport he has loved since age 13 worked hand in hand to help him.

“I had to get better to surf,” he says. “And I had to surf to get better. The two things worked together.”

I stood there watching and was fascinated. That day changed my outlook on things, and I would even say my life.

Getting his feet wet

Gary Revel was born in Sycamore, near Laurel, and grew up in Milford. His parents had a travel trailer that they parked near the Indian River Inlet, in what was then a private campground, and the family spent each summer there.

“At the age of 9, I was obsessed with fishing,” notes Gary, who also skateboarded and rode the ocean waves on canvas rafts with his friends.

In the summer of 1964, his family made a trip to Ocean City. “We walked out on the pier there to try some fishing, and in front of us, about a hundred feet out, were surfers. I stood there watching and was fascinated. And the next time that I went fishing, all I could think about was those guys riding the waves. That day changed my outlook on things, and I would even say my life.”

When Gary returned to the inlet, “I wasn’t satisfied riding my raft on my belly. I wanted to ride it on my knees.”

Later that summer, a surfboard rental stand opened up on the north side of the inlet. (In the early 1960s, a surfing craze began sweeping the country with the release of the Beach Boys’ first album with Capitol Records, “Surfin’ Safari.”) On the last day of the season, Gary rented a board and started learning how to ride it.

“I likened it to a skateboard,” he says. “The waves were perfect for a beginner, just about 2 feet tall, and it was a nice sunny day. I paddled out and rode the first wave in on my knees. The next one I rode in standing up, and that was that. I was hooked. I spent all winter just obsessed for the next summer to get here.”

For Christmas 1965, Gary’s parents gave him a 9-foot-4-inch Hobie surfboard (see page 47) that his dad bought from a shop in Harrington owned by surfing legend Bill Wise. (In August of that year, at age 26, Wise had been paralyzed while surfing near Bethany Beach. With the help of his wife, Rosalie, he kept his shop open, as well as another one in Ocean City. He also became a photographer, capturing pictures of waves and surfers, and wrote a surfing column for a local newspaper. He died in 2007.)

The next spring, as soon as the weather was warm enough, Gary and some friends started paddling their boards around Haven Lake in Milford and towing each other behind Gary’s small motorboat. “People in town were like, ‘What’s going on?’” he recalls.

By that summer, surfing had fully arrived in coastal Sussex. The quarter-mile beach north of the Indian River Inlet was typically packed with “a couple hundred people in the water at one time,” Gary says. Most of the surfers rode waves to the right. Gary started taking waves to the left, to get as much practice as he could.

“I just fell in love with it so much, and every time I rode a wave I got better. And it wasn’t that I wanted just to get really good. I wanted to be good so that I could spend more time in the water and ride more waves.”

That fall, he and two friends drove to New Jersey where they bought diver’s wetsuits. The two-piece suits weren’t especially good for surfing: “They were real thick and cumbersome and they had a tail called a beaver tail that came between your legs and snapped [onto the front]. If you fell off, the water came in around your waist and ran down around your legs. It was awful.”

Gary’s friends gave up for the winter, “but I kept at it. The winter seemed long, but it made such a difference in my surfing, being out in water alone and looking out for myself. Every wave was mine and I got to concentrate on it.”

In the summer of 1967, the Revel family traveled to Cape Hatteras, N.C., for a vacation. While swimming in a pool there, Gary’s dad had a heart attack and drowned. Gary was 16.

“That kind of freaked me out for a while,” he says. Still, he surfed as much as he could, and also fished and spent time alone in the woods. “I would be gone for five hours at a time and my mother had no idea where I was. It must have driven her crazy.”

Delaware’s Dodge City

Gary Revel remembers the summer of 1966 at the Indian River Inlet. He was 15, staying at the beach with his family, and surfers came north from Florida to enjoy the spot.

“People were camping on the beach and living under the bridge,” he says. “They went through the campground at night, stealing food. And they had cardboard boxes set up under the bridge to form cubicles. They would put their names on them.”

Drivers put balloon tires on their cars and dragged pieces of plywood up and down the beach, pulling people along the sand the way a boat pulls water-skiers. Someone put a rope under the bridge from which swimmers could swing out and drop into the inlet.

“People would jump off the bridge fairly regularly,” he says. “Someone would holler and everybody would look over at the bridge and there would be this guy standing up there with a bottle of wine, waving.”

“It was Dodge City,” Revel says. “Anything went. But nothing drastic or bad ever happened. If you were in the water and you were a little kid, the bigger guys helped you out. Everybody took care of themselves, and of each other.” ■

On the rise

In the late ’60s, surfboards were changing, getting shorter and more sophisticated. Gary bought a new 8-foot board in the spring of 1968 during a family trip to Cocoa Beach, Fla. “I rode it all the next day — it was like I was in training — and that day changed everything. I was where I could watch really good surfers; I had a new, shorter board, and by the time we got back to Delaware, it was a whole different ballgame.”

He entered a contest at Fenwick Island. Gary didn’t win, but one of the judges, who owned the Surf Shop East in Rehoboth Beach, asked him to be part of the shop’s surf team. Soon, Gary was also working for the owner, selling and repairing boards.

In 1969, he graduated from Milford High School and moved to Rehoboth Beach — “I left home and I never lived there again.”

He continued working for Surf Shop East, staying there after it changed hands and became Gemini, and surfing for its team. He traveled to amateur competitions up and down the East Coast, winning many and just learning from others. He was good enough that surfboard companies gave him boards and paid him to ride them, just to have their names associated with his.

But it didn’t go to his head: “Surfing really brought me joy. And I’m an extremist. If I do something, I get really involved in it. My goal was not to win championships, not to be the best surfer in a contest or on a beach. I just wanted to be the best surfer I could be. If I won a competition, that was just something that happened.

“Everybody knew who I was, but I sort of didn’t care. I just wanted to surf all the time.” ►

Going under

In 1981 Gary married Ryan Dorsey (no slouch herself when it comes to riding waves — see “Ryan’s Religion” on page 54). They and a friend, Brent Clark, started Timber Frame Systems, through which they built homes in the post-and-beam style. The Revels had four children, invested in a sawmill to earn some extra money, and Ryan started teaching biology at Indian River High School. And all of a sudden, it seemed, Gary was closing in on his 50th birthday.

“In my 40s, I would go out surfing with the kids and always felt that I got the waves that I wanted,” he says. “But I started feeling like I was slowing down. I ordered a new surfboard, but even then, I didn’t surf for a couple of months.”

March 5, 2003, was a sunny, warm, late-winter day. Gary was headed home from a meeting in Rehoboth Beach and stopped by the ocean in Bethany to check out the conditions.

“It was absolutely perfect,” he recalls. “The waves were 3 or 4 feet, the sun was at 1 o’clock, shining down on the water, and there was this gold color coming off the waves.”

He headed home, pulled on his wetsuit — despite the warm day, the water temperature was still 36 to 38 degrees — grabbed his board and drove back to the beach. He carefully parked his truck facing south so that it would be warm when he got back in, walked to the water’s edge and paddled out.

But something was wrong. Despite the ideal conditions for surfing, he just sat there on his board, unable to catch a wave: “I



Gary Revel was still ripping large waves in 1996, as he did here on the north side of the Indian River Inlet after Hurricane Bertha passed by the Delaware coast.

didn’t feel very good. I’d try to catch a wave but couldn’t stand up in time. Then I started breathing kind of funny.”

Suddenly, a wave caught his attention. “It was perfect. Golden. And I knew that I could catch it. But instead, I just stopped and watched it go by. And I thought then, ‘If I was going to die in the water, that’s the kind of wave I’d like to see coming toward me.’”

Finally, Gary started paddling toward shore. He made it to his truck, peeled off his wetsuit and started driving home. He remembers sitting at a stoplight in Millville and looking at the nearby Millville Volunteer Fire Company building; he doesn’t remember driving from the light to the fire hall, but all of a sudden he was sitting in front of its door.

“I pushed this button and a bell rang. A guy came out, took one look at me and said, ‘Are you OK?’ I said, ‘No.’ And I heard him call out, ‘We need a paramedic! Get the ambulance here!’”

Gary was two years younger than his dad had been when he had suffered a heart attack and drowned. “I kept thinking, ‘This can’t be. This can’t be.’ But I was having a heart attack.”

He was taken to Beebe Medical Center in Lewes. Shortly after crossing the bridge at the Indian River Inlet, while paramedics scrambled to stabilize his condition, he experienced another life-changing moment: what he calls an out-of-body experience.

“I was staring at the ambulance window and all of a sudden, I see it as clear as day: I’m looking down on the whole scene. Me lying there, paramedics scrambling, someone calling out for more morphine. Then it got quiet — they are still freaking out, but there’s no sound. And I thought, ‘Oh, my God, I’ve left. I’ve left the planet.’ And a voice said, ‘It’s OK — don’t worry. It’s fine, everything’s fine.’ It was just as calm as could be.

“I found myself with one foot through an entryway, a portal. There’s nothing solid in it, nothing you can touch, but I’m moving from someplace to another place. I feel like I’m halfway there and the voice says, ‘It’s OK, everything’s going to be fine. Just come on.’”

Despite the reassuring voice, Gary did not want to follow it. He had a wife and children at home, and was worried how they

would manage if he were dead. “I thought, ‘I’ve been selfish my whole life, surfing whenever I wanted, and now I’m going to be selfish in death.’ I had seen what had happened to my mother after my father died.”

“It will be OK,” the voice said again.

“No, it won’t,” Gary replied. “I have kids at home and they need a father.”

And there was another argument that he made. A friend’s child had recently died, and Gary, with his new knowledge, wanted to tell the friend what death was like.

“I know people who need to hear about this,” he told the voice. “Give me enough time to do that, and to see my kids grow up, and I’ll tell people about this experience. I won’t forget this, I promise.”

“OK,” the voice responded, reluctantly, it seemed. “If that is what you want to do.” And suddenly, Gary was back in the ambulance, his chest throbbing. “There was so much pain that I didn’t want to be there. And then I realized where I’d been was so peaceful, so happy. It was that wave — when I was looking at that wave I had that same feeling. And all I had had to do was put my foot through the door.”

I started having anxiety in the water. I would try to go surfing and I felt like I was in a foreign land.

He made it to Beebe, and then was flown by helicopter to Christiana Hospital near Newark, where doctors used stents to relieve a blockage in his heart. After the procedure was over, and he was able to talk, he said to the doctor, “I almost died.” The doctor replied, “You don’t come any closer.”

The fear factor

He was back in the ocean just six weeks later. Doctors cautioned him not to go surfing alone, advice that he ignored then and still does. “The greatest joy of my whole surfing life is being out there by myself. There’s something to be said for going out with your best friend or your kids, but that being alone thing has really stimulated me a lot of times.”

He surfed for several more years. And then, what he believes were side effects of

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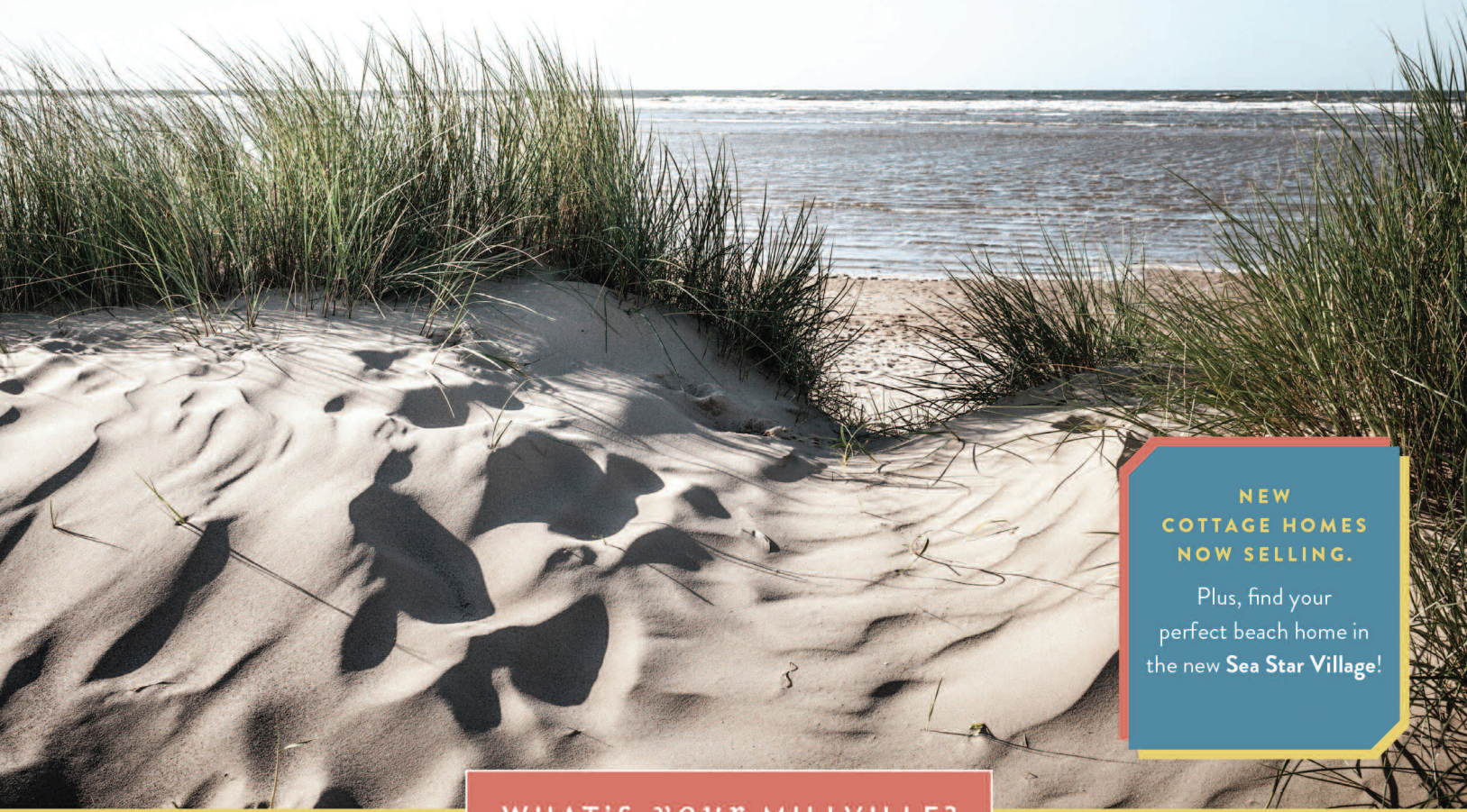
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medications he was taking — for high cholesterol and anxiety, to regulate his blood pressure and to keep his blood thinned — began to surface:

“Something was wrong. I started having anxiety in the water. I would try to go surfing and I felt like I was in a foreign land. I was having nightmares about sharks, and eventually I got to the point that I didn’t even want to go swimming. Anxiety became the overriding factor.” (It was during this time that he and Michael took that trip to Assateague and Gary was unable to stay in the water.)

I started feeling like I could get it back together. I spent a good portion of the winter of 2015 and 2016 finding myself.

Gary stopped taking his medicines, most of which he just quit overnight. But he slowly weaned himself off the ones prescribed to control anxiety. Paradoxically, he believes that they were *causing* it.

“I started feeling like I could get it back together,” he says. He cut back on his food intake, stopped drinking beer and started taking long walks on the beach, watching the water and picturing himself out there, surfing. “I spent a good portion of the winter of 2015 and 2016 finding myself.”

On Memorial Day weekend 2016, his wife was away. “There was this board lying around the house that had my name on it,” Gary recalls. “I knew that Michael had bought it for me, though he never said so. Ryan left and I just got up one morning, looked around, picked up the wetsuit and drove to the beach. It was May 28. The waves were tiny; I wouldn’t go out in those waves today. I walked down to the water and stood there, and I didn’t feel any anxiety. So I put the board down, hopped on my knees and went out.

“The first wave that I paddled for, I caught it, stood up and the wave went past me. And I stood there laughing. I had spent all these years telling people that when the waves are small, you’ve really got to paddle hard to catch them. And I had just done the exact opposite.”

He paddled back out and tried again. This time, he caught the wave and rode it. “Then I caught another and rode it a little farther.” >

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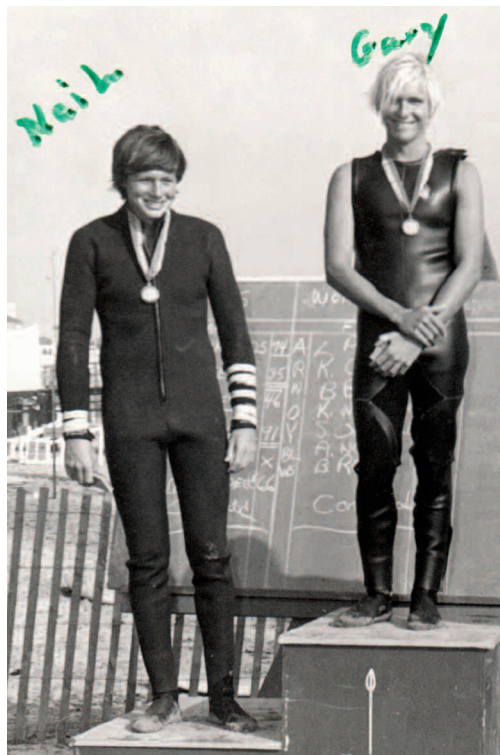
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Gary Revel and his buddy Neil Stevenson stand on a winner's podium after a 1970 surfing contest in Ocean City, Md. But Revel says, "My goal was not to win championships ... I just wanted to be the best surfer I could be."

He went home and texted Ryan. "I went surfing."

"And?" she replied.

"I can do it."

He went back to the beach every day after that. While surfing on the fifth day, he realized that he was catching the same waves and surfing them in the same ways as he would have done years before.

"That day was my 65th birthday," he says. "It was like the ocean gave me a birthday present."

Telling the tale

True to his word, 14 years after it happened, Gary still shares the story of his near-death experience. "I cry lots of times when I tell the story," he says. "It changed me in a lot of ways."

He is uncomfortable using the word "God" to describe the voice that he heard: "Why can't we say that there's a higher power out there and just be accepting of that? I don't know what it is or who's in charge, but I went somewhere that day — I wasn't down there on that stretcher."

He knows that the plea he made was to be allowed to see his children grow up, something that has happened: His youngest, Franci, graduated in June from Bennington College in Vermont and will start graduate studies at Cornell this fall.

"A day doesn't go by that I don't think about dying," Gary says.

But he has no regrets about giving up all of his medicines, despite his doctors' advice. "My cholesterol is high, and doctors want me to go back on medicine. But I always say no. I would rather live five years like this than 10 years taking medicines but feeling the way that I did."

And he is thrilled to be able to surf again.

"I never got into that spiritual, hippie, 'one-with-mother-ocean' type thinking — I was just having a good time. But I know that surfing is not just exercise. It goes way beyond that." ■

LYNN R. PARKS is a regular contributor to *Delaware Beach Life*.

Ryan's Religion

During a summer vacation in Bethany Beach with her family, Ryan Dorsey (now Revel) discovered the pleasure of riding ocean waves on a canvas raft. "I'm going to do this my whole life," she told her girlfriend.

The friend scoffed. But Ryan, now 61, still loves to go bodyboarding, a sport similar to surfing except that the board is shorter and the rider typically lies down.

"It's like religion," she says. "When you're out there, you are one with the world, one with the ocean. It's just all this energy and you. I know that you get kind of a rush after a time with endurance exercise. But you get that almost instantaneously with surfing. It's euphoria."

Ryan started bodyboarding in 1977 after her junior year at Hood College in Frederick, Md., where she studied biology. "I tried surfing," she says, "but bodyboarding is easier. And safer."

After graduation, she moved to San Diego, where she worked for a cancer research lab. She continued bodyboarding there, but finding her job boring, Ryan gave it up and moved to southern Mexico with a group of surfers. "She was one of the first bodyboarders to surf the Mexico Pipeline," the nickname of the waves on Playa Zicatela in Puerto Escondido, notes her husband, Gary.

"I really liked the challenge of the larger waves there," Ryan says of surf that's typically 6 to 8 feet high.

After six months, she returned to California and then moved back to Delaware. She and Gary, who met in the late '70s through mutual friends, were married in 1981.

Ryan says conditions have to be pretty good for her to venture into the waves now. And it still relaxes her: "Life is stressful, but you can't think about any of that when you're in the ocean. You have to be present or you could get hurt."

And she always emerges with a renewed sense of her place in the world. "When you're at the mercy of a wave, you realize how insignificant you are," she says. "You are no more important than a piece of sand. And that reminds you of the importance of not being selfish and of trying to do things for the greater good." ■



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