

Tri to Save Lives

by Sharon Robb | photo by Robert Murphy

If Len Rodriguez isn't the center of attention at races, like athletes and triathlon directors are, that's just fine with him. That means the veteran lifeguard and longtime instructor, and his Lake Worth-based Lifeguard Services, Inc. staff have done their jobs. It also means that everyone got through another swim safely.

Rodriguez and his staff of 40 lifeguards, dressed in uniforms "just like Baywatch" are always a welcome sight at various open-water swims, triathlons and adventure races. Some of the events they work are the Olympic and sprint-distance Escape to Miami Triathlon races, Swim Miami, Miami International Triathlon and the new SheROX Triathlon Series in Miami.

"Each year we keep improving our staff and what we do for them," Rodriguez says. "I believe the people that come to us are those who care about safety. We accept that challenge."

While athletes socialize with family and friends at post-race awards ceremonies, Rodriguez and his staff are usually in the background packing up water safety equipment, first aid bags, cell phones and two-way radios... and pulling wave runners, kayaks, rescue boards and boats out of the water.

It's all part of the job of making sure every athlete participating in every water-related event is safe and sound – which, in turn, is just part of the labor of love for Rodriguez, approaching his 20th year as an ocean rescue lifeguard.

Rodriguez, 52, has worked for Palm Beach County for 19 years. "I have learned so many great skills from so many great people," Rodriguez says. "One of my swim coaches once told me, 'Invest in what you know.' It didn't hit me until after college what he was talking about."

Rodriguez knows swimming. Born and raised on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, his swim coaches at the Boys' Club of New York were a big influence on him at an early age. And today, Rodriguez serves on the Board of Directors for the Palm Beach County Boys and Girls Club.

Looking for a new challenge, he turned to bodybuilding and was successful winning local contests – including Mr. West Palm Beach. The bodybuilding led to personal training. Then he turned to pumping up his lifeguard career.

He worked for two ocean rescue units at the same time. He not only worked for Palm Beach County, but also got a job lifeguarding on Miami Beach.

"I wanted to get as much experience as I could in five years," says Rodriguez, who made the 70-mile commute two days a week to Miami Beach.

"I wanted to work for the best. They thought I was crazy driving all the way from Lake Worth,

but I made it and I was never late."

Soon he was being asked to teach and train other lifeguards – which he still does, enabling him to "get the pick of the litter" when he is looking for new lifeguards for his company.

"I started my business 15 years ago lifeguarding for people at backyard parties, and everything just grew from that."

No triathlon is too big or small for his company. On Super Bowl Sunday, he worked with race director Laura Bender and her small triathlon at CB Smith Park in Pembroke Pines. He had five lifeguards work the event.

That day, Rodriguez wore two hats. When the last triathlete emerged from the water, he also served as the emergency medical technician taking care of first-aid emergencies.

"Most of my guys are emergency medical technicians," Rodriguez says. "Everything we do makes a difference."

He continues, "I like Laura because they really care about the safety in the water. It's so important. That is my little pet peeve with promoters and directors of triathlons in general. I feel they need to put more attention on the water."

Rodriguez is disturbed by several deaths reported at triathlons in the United States, including South Florida, in the past two years.

"It's common knowledge in triathlon circles that all of them occurred in the water," says Rodriguez, who has researched these cases extensively.

"Lifeguarding for triathlons is a whole dif-

ferent ball of wax then sitting on the beach," Rodriguez says. "You have to know what to look out for, you have to see any and all distress signals."

Rodriguez said medical examiners in all the triathlon death cases were inconclusive as to why the athletes died.

"Some said heart attack induced by fear and panic – which is true, that can happen," Rodriguez admits. "There is also lack of swimming ability or a guy may have gotten kicked in the head and lost consciousness."

"I believe all those things can be true but I also believe that swift retrieval of those individuals would most likely have given them a better chance of survival – spotting they were in danger, getting in there and taking them to safety immediately."

In his 15 years of providing lifeguard service to triathlons, adventure races and open water events, Rodriguez and his staff have not lost anyone – mainly because of preparation. He and his staff break down each event beforehand and then review it afterwards.

"I attribute that to luck and also because the guys that I use are all ocean-rescue trained and they are trained to spot problems in the water. After all these years we have it worked down to a science."

"To me, if the event was successful, then we were successful," Rodriguez says. "I am always willing to help somebody." ■

**"One thing I have always done my whole life, ever since I was a kid, was turn my hobbies into something that I could make money in."
- Len Rodriguez**

