

## COMMENTARY

VOICE FROM SUMMERLAND/HILLARY HAUSER

## Fatal shark attack leaves community united by a dear friend

It's hard to put into words what Jim Robinson was like, because he was larger than life, an old, inadequate saying. He was an urchin diver, such a prolific producer that everyone called him a "highliner."

In describing him one would have to say that he was thin and tall and wiry and good looking and had this wild, curly blonde hair that looked as if a comb had never seen it. He chewed gum constantly and snapped it so loud we'd all yell at him to stop.

But probably what comes to mind most is his energy. Robinson was so "on" that many people, after first meeting him, wondered if he was on pep pills, uppers, or who-knows-what. But he was on nothing but spirit and his love for everybody.

He was on a fast-moving love of life — which was yanked unceremoniously from him, and us, on the morning of Dec. 9, when he was attacked by a great white shark off San Miguel Island.

He was attacked while diving urchins, and the attack was an attack on us and it was an attack on the soul of the Santa Barbara Harbor.

Those of us who have participated in the past few days in the great waves of grief that wash over us from our waking moments till we go to bed at night have talked and talked about everything we feel — where we were at the moment of finding out (similar to how people shared the news of JFK's assassination), about our sorrow, about the love and encouragement Jim Robinson so freely gave to us, about how we might carry on the spirit he represented.

He was called "Weener" by his friends, (I have always been told I didn't want to know why this was so), and he called our house nearly every day. "Yo, ho, ho, Uncle Weener calling," he would announce.

We had gotten to know Ween really well by literal accident: My husband, Jim Marshall, an urchin/abalone diver, was coming back from a fishing trip at the islands in 1986, and in the dark, hit something in the channel — a log, a basking shark, he didn't know what.

The outdrive on his boat was ripped clean off, and the boat began to take on water through the gaping hole in the stern.

Jim Robinson was on the scene immediately and towed him to shore. The immediacy of his actions saved my husband's boat, and, who knows, maybe his life.

From that day forward, Weener became one of our dearest friends. We went skiing together every winter (he always left piles of money all over the floor), we lived with him at Point Arena, when the guys worked urchins up there.

At least once a week he would charge into our house, take a seat at my piano, and play his heart out. He was an accomplished blues pianist and formed a regular trio with my husband on guitar and Billy Hooten on either guitar or harmonica.

They always had so much fun doing this, and many times the group was augmented by Ween's best friends from the Laguna Beach area — Doug "Abu" Alani on saxophone, and John Deily making general noise. Ron Imanaka ("Laro") often accompanied by beating on a cookie sheet.

Out at sea, usually in Cuyler Harbor on San Miguel Island, Weener's boat, the Florentia Marie, was the center of action — "Hotel Ween," the divers called it.

At night, other boats would tie up to Hotel Ween, the barbecues would come out, food was shared, and always, lots and lots of tequila. It was Ween's trademark drink. At Point Arena, there is a bar that mixes up a tequila concoction named after him.

Robinson was a unifying force, the one who kept everyone's spirits up. He loved the ocean, loved diving more than anything, and whenever he was forced to stay out of the water, due to injury or whatever, he would become almost desperate: "The ocean is my life! I can't be anywhere but

out there!"

Our home was wide open for Weener at any time night or day, a place where he could walk in unannounced. During a period when he was depressed about a relationship problem, we would spend hours lying around talking about it, trying to sort it out. Similarly, if ever I ran into rough waters, Weener would call me every day, once or twice, even, to see how I was doing.

In the aftermath of his death, an astonishing fact has emerged: He was this exact sort of friend to many people.

He was a father figure to divers and tenders getting a start in the business, he was a friend of friends, he loaned great amounts of money without asking for anything in return, he gave gifts to everyone, constantly.

He called all of his close friends almost every day. Many of us are now trying to figure out how he had this much time to call us, when he was out at sea so many days out of the year, working.

No problem — he used his cellular phone, the bills for which sometimes ran as much as \$1,000 a month. He would call his mother, whom he referred to as his best friend, he called Abu and Deily in Laguna Beach, he called us. "Yo, ho, ho," the message always began. "How are you? I care. I love you." He always said "I love you."

On Dec. 9, at 8:45 a.m., I went to the beach for a walk with our three schipperkes, a habit that gives me time for meditation, gratitude, a simple time-out. It is always beautiful at the beach in the mornings, but this particular morning struck me as insanely beautiful and I began to have what I can only describe as a Zen experience.

I began to think of how incredibly beautiful earth life can be, what an incredible thing it is that we become physical for a time, and with beauty like this all around, no wonder we don't want to leave it.

But the thought then came that this earth beauty is only a small part of one's journey, and the more beautiful one thinks it is, the more one wants to cling to it — but it is only a very small part of the infinite journey. We will touch the stars.

Since I don't often have such deep thoughts about death, I cannot help today but feel that Uncle Weener was touching me on the way out of this life, giving me one of his little messages.

At home, I found I had a visitor: Pam Schrack, his housemate. As we were having lunch, during which we talked about



The fishermen's annual Christmas party was going on as planned per instructions of his mother, who insisted that it be a party, not a funeral.

Ween, the renter in the guest house on our property called out that she heard an urchin diver had been hit by a shark at the islands. Pam and I thought, "Oh, wow," but like so many other people who heard the news at this point, we were sure it was no one we knew.

Pam and I finished our lunch and then she left.

Moments later, she called. "It's Jimmy!" she cried. "He's gone!"

Like everyone else who knew and loved Jim Robinson, receiving this news was



Jim "Weener" Robinson's ashes were scattered from his boat into the ocean where he worked and died, off the Santa Barbara Harbor last Tuesday.

STEVE MALONE/NEWS-PRESS

like falling into quicksand, where words sit on the surface, then slowly sink into some ugly quagmire. I raced down to the Harbor, to be with Pam and her brother, Laro.

Although Robinson's body had been airlifted to Goleta Valley Hospital, the Florentia Marie was coming in, and we wanted to be there for Ward Motyer and Steve Stickney, the diver and tender who had so desperately tried to save his life.

We found out later that the Florentia Marie had anchored near Castle Rock, off the west end of San Miguel. Robinson had gone into the water with his dive scooter for a surveying of the area. No one knows how deep he was, but he came to the surface, got a hand up onto the transom, and said, "White shark. I got bit by a white shark."

When Ward and Steve began to pull him up, Robinson said, "No," possibly knowing he might fall apart.

That was his last word.

Steve, who had worked as an EMT on ski patrol in Washington state, knew what to do. They applied tourniquets anywhere they could, they tried with their hands to stop the bleeding from the most badly mangled legs, and minutes later, when he stopped breathing, they tried to breathe life into him. Francis Oliver and Tim "T.O." O'Connor came over to the Florentia Marie, and T.O. did CPR on Robinson endlessly and in desperation.

Robinson was airlifted off the boat.

The Harbor was aswarm of news people, cameras, a helicopter flying overhead, notepads and pens. I got into the car with Pam, who was talking on a cellular phone. Ween's dog, Kiki, jumped into my lap. She is a schipperke I'd given him and Pam, and Ween loved her furiously.

Suddenly, the grief was unstoppable and I was lost in sobs.

Craig Brooker came to the car, a bottle of tequila came out, everyone took swigs. Nerves were raw. Laro swore at the newsmen. Something got into the wind about Pam being Jim Robinson's wife, and suddenly the car was attacked by news people sticking microphones into the windows.

Pam put the car into reverse, and I got out. They swarmed me, and I ranted and raved about something, nothing made any sense. I called my husband on his boat. He said he was on his way in.

The fishermen congregated on the Navy Pier, then of course, at Brophy Bros. There was nothing to do but go crazy and cry and drink. Everyone went over the insane facts no one wanted to believe.

Some fishermen began to show their rage. Someone went out to some awards or monument store and had a plaque made. By 6 p.m. it was on the wall over the bar. It says: "In loving memory of Jim Robinson,"

and there is a little shelf on the plaque that holds a shot glass that is to remain full, like an eternal flame.

By that night, Jim Robinson's mother, Margaret, who lives in Rialto, had reached the boarding school in Washington state where Zachary Robinson is a student. There was no way she would allow Zack, age 15, to find out about his father by telephone or by newspaper.

By Saturday morning they were on their way to Santa Barbara. At 3 a.m. that same morning, my husband and I got out of bed, neither of us able to sleep.

In the dark, we went to the piano and began to sing quietly together, a Tom Waits ballad called "On the Nickel." When we got to the part that said, "What becomes of all the little boys, who never comb their hair?" we broke down and cried like babies.

Friends came to Santa Barbara from everywhere — Hawaii, Florida, Los Angeles. The fishermen's annual Christmas party at the Miramar Hotel on Sunday night was going on as planned, per instructions of Margaret, who insisted that it be a party and not a funeral.

Margaret and Derwin, Jim's father, were pillars of strength on which everyone leaned. She said she had never pictured Jim Robinson as an old man.

At the fishermen's Christmas party men were embracing men as if their lives depended on it, weeping, knowing, sharing the unsharable. The physical became utmost: hold me, feel me, for tomorrow we might not be here, like Ween. Oh, for the chance to hold him again!

On Tuesday, the memorial service took place at 10:30 a.m. In the previous days there had been discussion as to what church would be appropriate, what church would be large enough to hold what was expected to be a large crowd.

No one expected the line to go around the block, and that about 75 people wouldn't get in.

Doug Frazier led off with reading Whitman's "O Captain, my Captain," but lost composure somewhere near the lines, "Here Captain! Dear father! The arm beneath your head! It is some dream that on the deck, you've fallen cold and dead," and Margaret rushed up to give Doug the courage to continue.

There were more prayers, more poems, more tributes, and then Richard Robles, a friend of Ween's from high school, who with tears flowing from his eyes like a constant faucet and wiping his face repeatedly, punched through his grief time after time with hilarious stories — "that hair!"

The final speaker was Margaret, who said specifically to the fishermen, "Now, all you hurly-burly guys, you've been on the beach long enough, go back to work!"

Then the impossible happened: As the Rev. Dennis Wayman was in the middle of a reading from Ecclesiastes ("a time to be born, a time to die..."), the phone rang. Many people laughed. In fact, so many people laughed the amazing point was made: All of them had been called regularly and daily by Jim Robinson, who called to say nothing more than "Hello. How are you? I love you."

Then came the spreading of ashes. Roy Hauser of Sea Landing generously offered all three of his sport diving boats to take people out. Fifty-two followed the Florentia Marie out of the Harbor at about noon Tuesday — almost the entire diving fleet. Over their marine radios, the skippers decided what to do: the Florentia Marie would head toward San Miguel, and somewhere off Shoreline Park would anchor: The other boats would circle.

Later, people watching from high up on the Riviera said the whole thing looked like a choreographed dance.

Aboard my husband's boat, we watched the proceedings aboard the Florentia Marie as we circled. When I saw Sharon, who was Jim Robinson's spiritual adviser, speaking from the stern of the boat, I knew the moment was near.

Weener's ashes were delivered to the ocean he loved, followed by flowers and wreaths, then flares — lots and lots of flares.

Horns blared, tequila bottles were held high, a toast! And then Kenny Ludwig jumped into the sea naked — a display of raw love, mingling with the ashes of his friend.

I went over the side, too, clothes and all. I couldn't help it. Ween would have done the same for me.

Today there is talk of a Medivac system being put together for Santa Barbara. The guys are talking about how they are dealing with the whole phenomenon of going back to work. They wonder about diving off San Miguel.

But mainly they talk about the awesome spiritual presence of Jim Robinson. He, who wanted everyone to love each other and to get along, who was always in the mood "to party!" and to celebrate friendship, he who was always there to help and to listen, blasted his way with a strange sort of glory into the heart of Santa Barbara's fishing fleet.

Today, fishermen are talking and hugging, our phones are ringing off the hook. People are taking time to tell of the love they feel for each other. Can the measure of a successful life be any more than this?

Ho, ho, ho, it's Uncle Ween calling.

Hillary Hauser is a writer. She lives in Summerland.