

COMMENTARY



DANA HANCOCK/NEWS-PRESS

Friends of wrecks diver Jim Robinson plan to spread the rest of his ashes off of San Miguel Island today to mark the one-year anniversary of the shark attack which claimed his life. More than 20 boats circle the Santa Barbara Harbor during his funeral, above.

VOICE FROM SUNNYSIDE: HILARY HAUSER

The dance of a life lived deeply

The way to immortality is not through leaving buildings or writing up fortunes. It's through simple acts of kindness for one another.

A couple of years ago, I received an invitation to an important Mark the gift. I had been asked to be included, for among the guests were world-renowned architects, conductors, important business, the widow of the famed violinist Jascha Heifetz, and various jet-setters of the arts. (Sure, I'd have to find something appropriate to wear but had left this particular problem until the last minute.)

Now I was in trouble. The day before the event was to take place in Los Angeles the stores where I live, in Santa Barbara, were about to close. With hopes I recalled what I needed to do about as best I was preparing to run out the door when my telephone rang.

"Yo, ho, ho, it's Uncle Wessie calling!" came the old, familiar greeting. Jim Robinson, an wrecks diver who was a great friend to my husband and me, always announced himself that way. And although we never could tell us exactly why he was called that, we always called him Uncle Wessie.

I explained to Uncle Wessie my plight, and why I couldn't walk for very long.

"Well," he said, "I've got something for you to wear."



He went to bat for those who had no one else on their side, he supported struggling entrepreneurs, and he called everyone up every day to make sure they knew they were being thought of.

"It's perfect. Guaranteed. It'll be right over. It'll work. Don't go to town."

Whoever Uncle Wessie gave commands like that, a person listened. That's because he always considered the problem of his friends to be his own problem, and because he cared very much about coming up with real solutions his ideas were usually pretty good.

Twenty minutes later Wessie walked into my house with a brand new tuxedo. He had just bought it, for a small fortune, and I think he'd worn it only once. It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen, a Mark the gift in the collar of cashmere, a pair of striped silk trousers, a crisp white shirt and all the accessories: bow tie, cummerbund, and a belt with an elegant silver buckle.

"Here," he said, "be reassured. 'Tis a no."

I got a full view, but to be allowed the suit of new clothes from a full, body-wrecks diver with big shoulders was a pretty wild idea. It was also one of the best things I'd ever received from a friend. I don't know many people who willingly loan their expensive evening clothes to others, especially for a dinner party.

Minutes later, I had on Wessie's tuxedo. He adjusted the bow tie. Then asked me to put on earrings and a pair of high heels, which I did. Looking in the

mirror I thought I looked pretty wonderful. So were emotional that if I were some important thing then a shirt mark.

"You don't think I look like a man?" I asked him. "No!" he insisted. He went to our CD player, put on a recording of Tom Waits singing "Jeremiah to the Blues," and then started to dance. Around the living room he danced and sang, until we reached lyrics that were something like, "And you feel just like Captain, she looks like Rita Hayworth, at the corner of the sidewalk's long there."

We fell apart laughing, and this got the final stamp of approval on the tuxedo.

I went to the gift, and to this day people still talk about what I wore. Among my favorite, sentimental photographs is one of me sitting at a table and to a great orchestra conductor who was wearing the most amazing thing I had on.

The photograph is sentimental because it is a reminder of my dance with Uncle Wessie. It is a reminder of his generosity, his kindness that I wear his clothes, his insistence on how beautiful and emotional I would be at the gift ball.

I think of his incident today, the one-year anniversary of his death.

Today, a small handful of his friends are taking the rest of Jim Robinson's ashes out to sea — to the spot off San Miguel Island where a great white shark killed him on the morning of Dec. 8. On a beautiful morning exactly one year ago, Uncle Wessie had gone into the water near Castle Rock and moments later he was tragically attacked. Despite the heroic efforts of his fellow divers and crew, he was dead within minutes.

No one in the Santa Barbara Harbor will ever forget his funeral, the throng of people outside the church, the thousands that followed his widow just a short mile to sea, the tears and gut wrench that could be seen for miles. No one will forget the thoughts, nights and tears, the disbelief and outrage at what had happened.

But all the stories that have been told and retold during the past year about Uncle Wessie, it turns out that many people like me have a hard time about its retelling, caring so deeply about friendship. It turns out my story of the tuxedo is not that unusual. Uncle Wessie himself infinite amounts of money, even when he was low on funds himself, and when he had money he insisted on sharing it by giving gifts. He was generous to his friends, giving the money away. He went to bat for those who had no one else on their side, he supported entrepreneurs struggling against the odds, and called everyone up every day to make sure they knew they were being thought of.

He loved even when love was not returned. "What is the way to immortality?" It is not through leaving buildings or writing up fortunes. It is through simple acts of kindness for one another, the giving of personal loans for a friend. When buildings have crumbled and fortunes have been spent, unconditional love and selfless acts of caring live on.

It's funny how the deeds of Jim Robinson continue to guide his friends who think of him now — what would Uncle Wessie do about this situation? Maybe I should handle it the way Wessie would have, maybe I should be so stingy, maybe I should take more time to tell someone I care, maybe I should suggest some gift for everybody, maybe I should live a little more.

Those who die young are the beloved of the gods, said the Greeks. A diver who dies from a great white shark attack dies like a king, say the divers.

These thoughts are comforting, but there is something else: a long life is not as important as a deep one.

When I think of Uncle Wessie I think of deep living brought about by unconditional loving, and these thoughts continue to be an inspiration to me today.

I cherish these thoughts, along with the memory of my dance with Uncle Wessie while wearing his beautiful tuxedo.

Hilary Hauser is a local writer.