

## IN MEMORIAM

## WIN SWINT

1946-1999

Once again the urchin diving community in the Santa Barbara Harbor is wracked by anger, rage, and pain caused by one of their most visible divers being yanked from their midst. Win Swint, one of the "gnarliest" divers in the harbor, is gone—lost at sea.

The divers know their business is filled with risks—white sharks, dangerous currents, the sudden rogue wave, shallow reefs, and hidden rocks. A senseless accident, however, is not one of the risks the divers are willing to suffer lightly. On Tuesday, August 24, Win was surfacing from a dive at about four in the afternoon at Becher's Bay, Santa Rosa Island; right at the same time a 49-foot sailboat from San Diego, the *Abacus*, was looking for a place to anchor.

The *Abacus* ran over Win's air hose, which became tangled in its propeller, and even though the sailors heard Win yelling and even though they saw him disappear underwater, they left the scene. About 45 minutes later the *Abacus* called the Coast Guard, which sent a helicopter to the area before nightfall. Other fishermen in the area went to Win's boat, *San Augustine*, to begin searching for him. Despite these efforts, and despite days of searching by the Coast Guard, the National Park Service, Sheriff's Department divers, and friends who hired private planes to search for Win, he has been declared lost.

A lifeline cut, a life cut short. Elwin O. Swint, Jr. was 53 years old. During these past recent days, many of us who knew Win have looked back and remembered things about him that make us cry and make us laugh. We have felt his powerful essence, which in a strange, weird way helps to combat the brutal image of his horrible death. In remembering, there comes a renewed aliveness of his character. Win would have loved knowing there is so much hullabaloo going on about him, so much love and grief—for in some ways he didn't fully believe that people cared about him.

Win was a loner whose fiery nature and toughness is legendary. A man of grit and determination, built from steel within and without, Win was "like a knight in armor," said Bob Evans, who worked with Win on abalone mariculture projects in Baja. "Gnarly" is the most common description you hear about this man.

After I first met Win in 1977, we went out to Talcott Shoal on his boat, *Quicksilver*, and I was stunned to watch him leap overboard to bodysurf monstrous waves by himself. He had been a Navy Seal, and in the ocean he was a human seal in every sense of the word. The ocean was his lifeblood, his natural home.

He had a physique that could move mountains—which he did after his house burned down in the Sycamore Fire. Instead of fishing around in the ashes for souvenirs, instead of moaning and groaning at his misfortune, Win rented a bulldozer and shoved everything aside. Then he built a new house. And argued like hell with the insurance company. This is when I got to know him the best, for while he worked on rebuilding, I rented him my family's house at Miramar Beach. His family came during the holidays for the year he was there—his father, Elwin O. Swint, who is a retired Navy captain, his mother, Billie, his sister, Mary, and her hus-



band, Bruce Morrison. There were feasts and bridge games, talks and walks. Beginning then, and in the years following, I got to know Win's girlfriends and his second wife, Carmen, and after that, I lost track. Love remained elusive to Win, although he constantly worked on himself and tried to see what was going on within.

The irony of this is that people around him cared deeply for him, and Win himself knew how to give. You could call Win and yell "Help!" and he'd be there. Soon after I met him, he was helping me with the horrendous difficulty of caring for my mother as she was dying during 1977. He came daily to carry heavy things and to sit with us while we maintained, as well as we could, a reasonable semblance of cheer. During the El Niño storms of 1983, when my landlady's beach house was being flooded by a raging ocean, Win gathered up some of his diver friends and rushed over to sandbag the house. He helped me move, he helped me work things out. He also went with me to the hospital when I faced some pretty serious stuff, because he did not want me to be alone.

The friends who weep for Win today are remembering similar moments, times when he came as a friend, the

times he stood strong where others failed. Win had the fieriest temperament of any diver in the harbor. Sometimes people cowered under his fury, but that same fury is what helped the abalone divers defend their fishery as it dwindled. As a reporter covering marine issues for the *News-Press*, I often covered Win's activities in his role as the president of the California Abalone Association. I'll never forget the meeting at which California Fish and Game Department officials were considering the expenditure of \$100,000 to study red abalone. Win stood up, and in one of his classic rages, shouted, "Why don't you ask us divers? We'll tell you for NOTHING!"

He was an ocean pioneer, particularly in developing abalone-growing methods. When he was living at my family beach house he called one day to demand that I come over immediately. "You can see them!" he said. "They've just come out!"

I went over, and in a giant aquarium he had set up in the family room, he pointed excitedly to tiny spots on the side of the tank. They were "spat," post-larval abalone no bigger than pinheads. Win pointed them out with pride, as if they were his children. Those that got big enough he took down to the harbor to place in habi-

tats made of big black drums. With mesh on either end to allow the flow of seawater, the abalone inside the drums were fed kelp, and they grew.

In the early 1980s, Win organized the Great Abalone Plant at San Miguel Island, during which commercial divers led sport divers in reseeding the reefs with baby red abalone. Soon after, he went to Baja to set up abalone mariculture projects, one in Bahia Tortugas and the other at Cedros Island. Bob Evans, a photographer-inventor who worked with Win to set up these projects, described Win as a "visionary."

When the abalone fishery closed in 1996, a part of Win closed down too. Although he turned to fishing for sea urchins as most of the other abalone divers did, he became less visible in the harbor. He became a loner and often worked in wind-racked conditions out at the islands by himself. Where before he had been vociferous in his political work, his interests now turned inward, to the arts.

He began to study sculpture, taking classes, reading books on anatomy, studying technique. Then he began to create—bronze figures, faces and bodies, some of them distorted and modern, others in a classic, Mayan, or Polynesian style. His work was exhibited at the Faulkner Gallery and entered into juried shows, and Win began to win awards. Today at Win's house there are unfinished works in progress, plaster casts of figurines, hands, torsos, and faces, ready to be bronzed.

Win always had a love of history and the Greek classics. He would read you passages from the *Iliad* and make you think about it. Carmen describes how they would sit around comparing Greek literature to the Bible. He wrote poetry and songs and loved to play the banjo. His girlfriend Lisa, who helped him finish building his Sycamore Canyon house, played mandolin to accompany his banjo, and together they raised ducks. At the last, his two best girlfriends were Sophie and Zoey, two dogs that got to eat steaks and go around town with him in his olive green Mercedes.

Win's son, Jason Corlett, 25, is his sole heir—and his spitting image. In the financial business in Newport Beach, Jason is only now getting to know all that his father was and what he meant to others. He is beginning to incorporate within himself the legend, and it is a pretty big job.

Win Swint's memorial service, with the Rev. Jerome Smith officiating, will take place on Saturday, September 4 at 11 a.m. at the end of the Breakwater in the Santa Barbara Harbor, near the sandspit. Following that, urchin divers will take their boats out to sea in a flotilla that will gather off Shoreline Park to commemorate their fallen comrade. Later in the afternoon, a private celebration for Win will be held at the boatyard in the harbor, Harbor Marine Works. Here, the stories will continue to be told and retold about the diver who was a Navy Seal, artist, musician, lover of women, fiery volcano, contrite heart—and above all, a knight in armor.

Godspeed, Win. We won't forget you.

—Hillary Hauser

Hillary Hauser, a Summerland-based journalist and friend of Swint's, cofounded the ocean activist group *Heal the Ocean*.