

RETIREE DIVES INTO LIFEGUARDING

At 65, YMCA guard turns her passion into a second career

BY BOB MONTGOMERY
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ELIZABETH CITY — At age 65, Sylvia Deerfield is the oldest lifeguard at the Albemarle Family YMCA. But don't tell her she's too old to save a life.

Swimming, a lifelong passion, has carried Deerfield into her golden years.

Each morning around 5:30 a.m., Deerfield reports to the YMCA, where a "die-hard" group of working people are waiting to take their daily wake-up swim.

Once the pool is open, Deerfield stands guard to ensure swimmers enjoy a safe morning workout and they leave refreshed.

"I never dreamed I would work at the YMCA," said Deerfield, who retired three years ago from Riverwind Health and Racquet Club.

Deerfield operated Riverwind for more than 15 years.

"I've learned if you're passionate about your vision, it may come to fruition."

Deerfield was working as an executive secretary at the Christian Broadcasting Network in Virginia Beach, Va., when her brother, Craig C. Barkley, a retired Army colonel, purchased the old riverfront Elizabeth City Hospital. That was about 20 years ago.

Barkley turned the building into apartments, and eventually added the Riverwind Health and Racquet Club.

Deerfield said she didn't mind her job at the network, but nothing was holding her back from taking on new challenges.

"I gave that up to help my brother manage the apartment," she says.

"I became executive director of the Riverwind Health and Racquet Club until we sold it in 2003. Then I retired



Lifeguard Sylvia Deerfield, 65, watches the pool as swimmers enjoy a morning workout at the Albemarle Family YMCA in Elizabeth City. Deerfield is the oldest lifeguard at the facility. JUSTIN FALLS/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



"I've learned if you're passionate about your vision, it may come to fruition," Sylvia Deerfield says.

and did nothing for two years."

While at Riverwind, she was a regular swimmer there. She'd also go swimming at the pool at the Coast Guard base.

At the base, Deerfield made several contacts that eventually helped her earn

her lifeguard certification.

One day last year, Deerfield was swimming at the base pool during her lunch break when she ran into Steve Vaughan, who used to work for her at Riverwind.

"I said Steve, 'I love swimming, I want to be a lifeguard - can I?'" she asked him.

"If you can go down and get this brick, you can try out," Vaughan replied.

Deerfield swam 7 feet to the bottom of the pool, grabbed the brick and resurfaced.

She next swam back and

forth across the pool several times with the brick.

That's how she earned her tryout, which required her to rescue a large muscle-bound swimmer who pretended to be drowning and was sinking, she said.

Deerfield passed the lifeguard certification test, but she was not offered a lifeguard's position at the base.

"The Coast Guard never hired me. I was so disappointed," Deerfield said.

"I think they thought I was a woman of 64 years old and couldn't do it."

Then Vaughan made a

phone call last May that changed her luck.

"Steve spoke with Sarah Murray, the aquatics director at the YMCA," Deerfield said. "She called me and hired me."

Deerfield said she is loving every day of her post-retirement "career" as a YMCA lifeguard.

She said she stays in great shape by eating healthy and staying active by exercising, mainly swimming.

Deerfield works most mornings, from 5:30 to 9 a.m.

During high school swim season, she helps as a life-

guard at evening practices for the Northeastern High School swim team.

She said she always loved to swim, but she never thought she'd end up retiring and then starting a new career doing what she loves most.

Matt Wood, a Pasquotank commissioner and member of the YMCA Board of Directors, said he's been impressed with Deerfield's vigor for many years.

"She's inspirational," Wood said.

"She's going to keep doing more and more and more."