

SAN DIEGO Reader

STAIRWAY TO AQUATIC HEAVEN

The man behind the stairs to Garbage Beach PAGE 2

Tiki Oasis, the sound of '90s West Coast hip hop and Chicano roots rock: Events to plan your August around

PAGE 4

"If you build it, they will surf."
(Photo by Shona Neufeld)



STAIRWAY TO AQUATIC HEAVEN

How San Diego's first and only surfing coordinator brought stairs to Garbage Beach

By Shona Neufeld
SAN DIEGO READER

"San Diego City built a staircase at Sunset Cliffs Boulevard and Ladera Street."

— from Kathy Blavatt's *San Diego's Sunset Cliffs Park: A History*, written for the Ocean Beach Historical Society

There are other entry points to the beach below Sunset Cliffs; but none of them are as easy to navigate as the Ladera Street

Stairs. Hundreds, maybe thousands of people use them every week. Families come to check out the tidepools, bringing young kids and old folks who might have trouble otherwise. And of course, there are the surfers, who use them to reach the break at Garbage Beach.

There is no mention of Doug Smith in Blavatt's account of those stairs. And even after Adam Bloomberg and the Garbage Beach Surf Club held an event on March 29th of this year to honor Smith's contribution to the stairs' creation, you could be

forgiven for never having heard of him. They intentionally kept publicity to a minimum, handing out only a few fliers to the regular Cliffs crew in order to reduce crowds and allow easy access for Smith and his friends. "If we had advertised, it *really* would have been out of control," said Bloomberg. (I learned about it from local surfer Richard Aguirre while I was out riding my bike.)

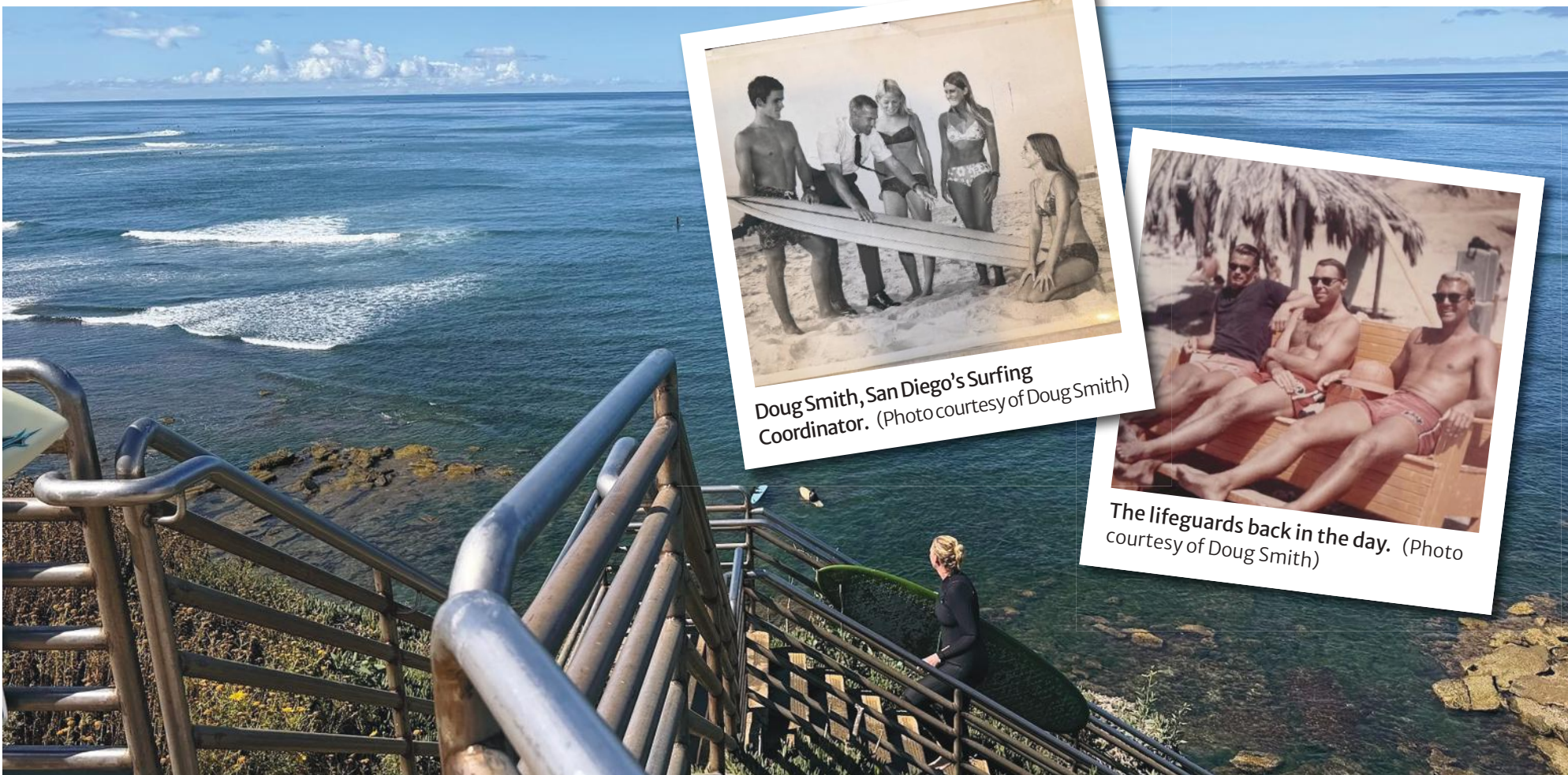
The sun had yet to break through the Sunday-morning marine layer as a group of thirty or so cheerful surf enthusiasts spanning three generations gathered by the stairs. Small, surfable waves could be heard crashing below while seagulls cawed above. A man named Smitty, 76 and a longtime friend of Smith's, told me that before the stairs went in, it was hard getting down the cliff. "You'd have to hand someone your board and hang onto a rope," he said. "We had big heavy boards back then."

The stairs were in place by the time event

organizer Bloomberg arrived from South Africa in the early '80s, but that doesn't mean things were easy.

"When I first got here, it was rough," he said. "You know — it was *really* local...so you kinda had to earn your way in. But Doug was nice to me when other people weren't. He invited me to his house to watch some fights with his kid and all the younger generations. And then, I surfed with him over the years and we got to know each other. Eventually, somebody told me along the way that he was responsible for the stairs at Garbage."

Recently, Smith pulled up at the bench above the stairs, and Bloomberg turned to some of the locals hanging out at the spot and asked if they knew who Smith was. They didn't. Bloomberg thought, "Man, while he's alive, he should get the recognition. That piece of history should be kept, for sure." When his kid heard the story, he said, "Hey dad, you just unlocked something! Nobody ever heard that before."



Doug Smith, San Diego's Surfing Coordinator. (Photo courtesy of Doug Smith)

The lifeguards back in the day. (Photo courtesy of Doug Smith)

"It was such a shame to think that we had all this great surf here and really no safe way to go down." (Photo courtesy of Shona Neufeld)

Doug Smith was born in Ocean Beach on St. Patrick's Day: March 17th, 1935. Already, his family had been in the neighborhood for three generations. His grandmother owned a horse stable where the 7-11 on Bacon and Voltaire sits today, just blocks from the beach. As for Smith, "We lived on Long Branch on the 4800 block, and then we got a one-bedroom beach bungalow on the 5000 block. There were seven of us living there. Cars couldn't get out into the sand; that was the beginning of the beach. But now it's homes and a parking lot."

A large tidepool would often form at the end of Long Branch, and young Doug would collect Pismo clams there. "I could look at the sand and tell the spots where they were. I got pretty good at it. Luckily, that helped us survive through the times, because a war [WW2] was going on then, and things were expensive. So we lived a lot on clam chowder." He remembers the Navy firing artillery from PB Point down the shoreline past Pacific Beach, Mission Beach, and Ocean Beach. "You could see tracers at night, and all the explosions in the sky. A plane would pull a sleeve that was about 15 or 18 feet long, and they would fire at the sleeve. I often thought, 'Gee, that's kind of risky for the pilot!'"

Down below, Doug took a risk of his own and started surfing. "I didn't get any assistance from anybody. I came from a big family, and I never owned a board. I always was using somebody else's surfboard...a lot of friends had boards, they were always willing to share, and so that was my opportunity." A self-described "beach nut," he happily recalls his years with OB lifeguard legend Mouse: "all the diving we did for abalone and lobster,

surfing. Yeah it was a good life. Just a clean, good, fun life."

He became an OB lifeguard himself, working from 1954 until 1975. "I worked with a really good crew, and a bunch of really great guys, good camaraderie. I loved the life, and if I were to start all over again, I would become a lifeguard again. I love the outdoors. It was very professional and really kind of a rewarding feeling to be a part of it all. I gave lectures in the local high schools on rip currents and ocean safety. They'd come down and surf as part of their PE class. I also developed the inter-high school surfing competition," which still takes place today, along with a surfing safety school for kids. But his biggest contribution to local surf culture remains the stairs.

At the ceremony, a few old friends told stories of the old days, and offered expressions of gratitude to the guest of honor. Then Doug Smith, 91 years old, adorned with a luau and a kukui-nut necklace, stepped confidently up onto the bench and delivered a brief speech.

"Well, I'll first say that San Diego has some of the finest surf in the whole coast of California," Smith began. "Some of the other cities have surf, but one thing that's unique about the surf here at Sunset Cliffs is that it's all reef break. Of course, reefs create the size of the surf, and also create the shape of the surf. And that's what makes the surf in San Diego so unique."

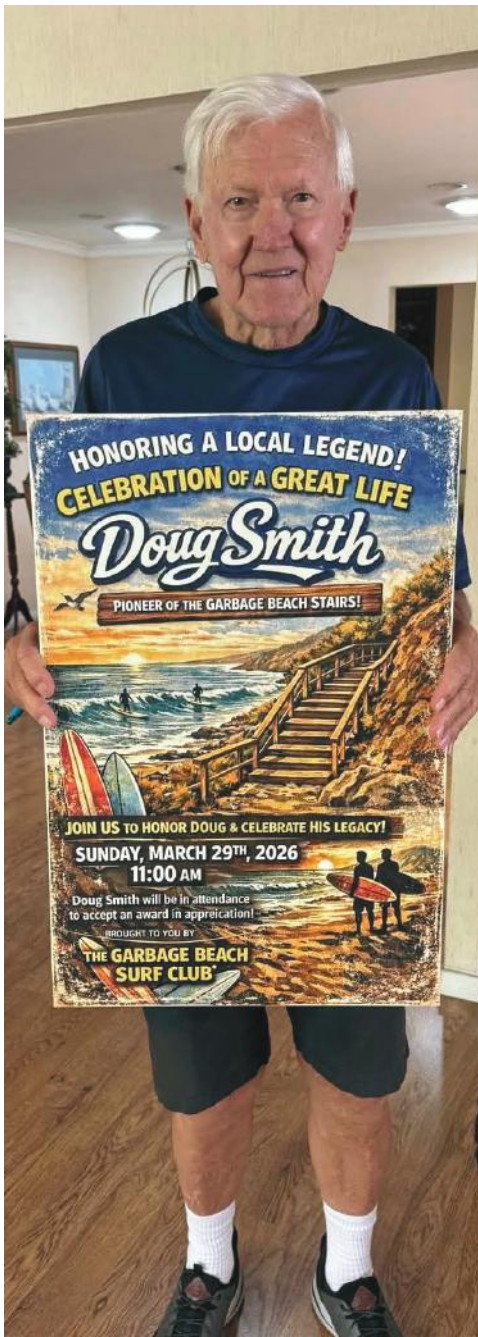
Back in the '60s, San Diego had good surf but poor access. "A lot of surfers cut their own trails, and they were really, truly very dangerous. I was a lifeguard, and a position came up known as the 'Surfing Coordinator.' I put my name in for that

and I got the position...I was sitting at my desk one day, and thought about the uniqueness of this area right here, where we have two breaks side by side — one for the goofy foot going left, and one for the other break, for surfers going to the right, known as a regular foot. Being a city Surfing Coordinator, I sat down, took a piece of paper and a pen, and I wrote up a requisition to request the city to put in a set of stairs. And it wasn't very long before I received a notice from one of the secretaries at the clerk's office that it was accepted, and I was very grateful for that. It was such a shame, again, to think that we had all this great surf here and really no safe way to go down."

Five years later, the position of Surfing Coordinator was dissolved due to lack of funding, and Smith went back to lifeguard work. But the position's first and only occupant had done what he set out to do. "They got going with the project, and they amazed me how fast they did that," especially given the site's tricky topography and composition. "Thanks to the city of San Diego."

The crowd, however, was there to thank the man who got it all started. They applauded and cheered for Smith, who was flabbergasted at the turnout. "So I...uh, gosh, I'm just, I'm overwhelmed, I'm just overwhelmed. I would like to thank the brothers of the Sunset Cliffs Surfing Association for making this possible. I feel like I don't deserve this. Thank you all for being here."

Before I left, I thanked Doug again for his efforts to get stairs put in at my favorite place to surf. We shook hands and he wrapped both his hands around mine. With a big, heartfelt smile, he looked me in the eyes and said, "Keep surfing."



Doug Smith
(Photo courtesy of Doug's son Kent Smith)

Cheap Car Rental

Buy Here, Pay Here.
Rent-to-Own.

Daily
from **\$20**

Weekly
from **\$100**

Monthly
from **\$350**

Rent for only
\$100/day

\$25 OFF
expires 8/14/26

Car Rentals, Inc.
1516 W Redwood St, San Diego 92101
760-633-3552 | 619-233-8300
Auto Sales & Rentals | Airport | Encinitas | Oceanside

SUVs • Navigators • Expeditions • Suburbans • RVs • Explorers
15-Passenger Vans • Minivans • Luxury Cars • Motorcycles
18 years & older | Cash deposits | 100 free miles/day
Open 24-7 | All major credit cards accepted

Harley-Davidson Road King®

AUTHENTIC TASTE OF NEPAL & INDIA

20% OFF
Buy one entree and get
the second one 20 % off
One coupon per table and cannot
combine with other offer.
Offer expires 09/15/26

Bhatti Himalayan Grill
3737 Murphy Canyon Rd. Suite F,
San Diego, CA 92123
(858) 737-4330
www.bhattihg.com
7 days a week 11am-9:30 pm

20\$ OFF
with purchase of \$100
and above excluding tax.
Valid for dine and take out and
cannot combine with any other offer.
Offer expires 09/15/26

Tiki Oasis, the sound of '90s West Coast hip hop and Chicano roots rock: Events to plan your August around

By Reader Staff
SAN DIEGO READER

TIKI OASIS

Tiki Oasis 2026 marks the 25th anniversary of the tiki festival. The five-night, four-day event includes a live main stage concert, tropical cocktails curated by top mixologists, a sunset luau dinner, pool lounging, fashion parades, swanky suites, disc jockeys, art exhibits and more. Learn about tiki and mid-century style, design, and lifestyle from experts, and enjoy a bustling marketplace with artists, makers and traders, wedding options and more. Performers scheduled to appear include Trabants and a reunion of the Strawberry Alarm Clock with original members alongside guitarist Steve Bartek of Oingo Boingo. Five of the players were on the classic

Incense and Peppermints album — Gene Gunnels, Mark Stephen Weitz, Randy Seol, George Bunnell, and Steve Bartek — while Howard Anderson has been with the group since 1986. Strawberry Alarm Clock will appear on Sunday, August 9, with an album release party for their new full-length “Where’s One?” out this month via Big Stir Records.

Where:

Town & Country San Diego,
500 Hotel Circle, San Diego

When:

August 7–9, 2026,
8:30 am – 12:00am

Ages: All Ages

Cost: \$189–\$699

TOO \$HORT AND WARREN G

Too \$hort and Warren G helped shape the sound of '90s rap. Too \$hort kicked off his music career in Oakland, California in the early 1980s by selling custom rap tapes from his car trunk. He became known for his unapologetic style and songs about flashpoint topics such as pimping, promiscuity, and explicit street tales that seemed to both glorify and provide cautionary commentary on sexual politics and drug culture. Funk-heavy tracks engineered specifically for car stereos with the bass turned all the way up include iconic hits like “Blow the Whistle” and “The Ghetto.” Rapper, producer, and DJ Warren G rose to fame when his debut solo album reached multiplatinum sales status. He’s known for smooth, G-funk-defining classics like his 1994 global hit single “Regulate” featuring Nate Dogg, which peaked at number

two on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100 and is celebrated for its legendary opening line, “Regulators, mount up!” Other tracks such as “This DJ.” fused melodic hip-hop with 1970s funk and soul samples, helping to shape the West Coast sound of the 1990s.

Where:

Sea World,
500 Sea World Drive, San Diego

When:

Saturday, August 8, 2026, at 6 pm

Ages: All Ages

Cost: Included with Sea World ticket, \$79.99 upgrades available

THE SLEEPWALKERS

The Sleepwalkers have been playing authentic Chicano roots rock since 1992. They specialize in original American music styles ranging from blues and country to Tex-Mex, Cumbia, and their own brand of roots rock. They’ve performed and recorded with Link Wray, Ronnie Dawson, Sleepy Labeef, Charlie Ryan, The Texas Tornados, The Blasters, The Fabulous Thunderbirds, Kid Ramos, Freddy Fender, The Rev. Horton Heat, The Supersuckers, Rosie Flores, Graham Parker, El Vez, The Royal Crown Revue, Harry Dean Statton and many others. They’ve been nominated for over a half dozen San Diego Music Awards, including for Best Americana/Roots band and Best Local Recording. They recently released a single for “Baila Maria,” which precedes their upcoming studio album “Almas Perdidas,” due in October via Blind Owl Records. The Noche de Cumbia bill in East Village includes Wachiwara and Las Sucias.

Where: The Quartyard, 1301 Market Street, San Diego

When: Saturday, August 15, 2026 at 5 pm

Ages: 21+ **Cost:** \$19.98

Reader

855 First Ave. Suite 201A
San Diego, CA 92101

sandiegoreader.com

DISTRIBUTION: San Diego Reader is distributed free of every month through the Peninsula Beacon and San Diego Uptown/Downtown News. COPYRIGHT 2026. All rights reserved.



SCAN TO SIGN UP
FOR OUR
NEWSLETTER!



ASU
NEWS
WELL

Interested in supporting our newsroom? Donate at timesofsandiego.fundjournalism.org/donate

WHO WE ARE

EDITOR

Matthew Lickona

CONTRIBUTORS

Sgt. Tiki
Shona Neufeld

WEB & SOCIAL MEDIA

Tessa Balc
tessab@timesofsandiego.com

GENERAL MANAGER

Andrew Keatts
andrewk@timesofsandiego.com

PRODUCTION COORDINATOR

Chris Baker
cbaker@timesofsandiego.com

ADVERTISING

advertising@timesofsandiego.com

SUBMISSIONS/NEWS

TIPS: Send press releases, tips, photos or story ideas to mlickona@sandiegoreader.com.

For breaking news and investigative story ideas contact the editor by phone or email.

DIGITAL EDITION: For up-to-the-minute news about your neighborhood, visit us at timesofsandiego.com

Fixed Bridge All-On-Six for \$12,500

Root Canal Special
starting at **\$500**
Extra treatment for additional cost.

Immediate Load Dental Implant \$3800

Delayed Load Dental Implant \$1550

Start to Finish!
(Implant, Abutment, Crown)

We accept all major PPO insurance plans
Dr. S. T. Sawa
Call for Additional Services and Specials

CareCredit
Multilingual

Ask About **0% Interest**
for 24 months
CALL FOR A FREE CONSULTATION (619) 346-7483
407W. Madison Ave. • El Cajon, CA 92020 • drsawa@sbcglobal.net
www.immediatetoothreplacement.com