

FORTUIN FAVOURS THE BRAVE

“It doesn’t matter where you come from. Anyone can be a hero.”

At the age of 21, volunteer rescue swimmer Robin Fortuin saved six people from drowning in the rip currents at Monwabisi Beach near Cape Town. For his bravery, Cape Town-born Fortuin was named Centrum Guardian of the Year. This is his incredible story...

Robin Fortuin - Centrum Guardian of the Year

Where did your love for swimming start?

As a child from the Western Cape, I was born a water baby, always swimming. My first job was working at the Muizenberg Water Slides. After that, I went to Strandfontein Lifesaving Club. While I was there, just a little way down the beach, you have the National Sea Rescue Institute (NSRI) Station 16. I used to watch them train and see what they do. And, I thought, ‘Wow, that’s amazing.’ Then I went to go and join them.

What was it like when you started at the NSRI?

When you join, you don’t just start out at the NSRI as a rescue swimmer; you start right at the bottom. I don’t know if each station is different, but at our station, you

start out by cleaning, scrubbing and learning the equipment. You wash your senior’s wetsuits after training. Because we do our own maintenance, we had to clean the boathouse, the toilets, the kitchen, whatever. It’s like a rite of passage.

What’s challenging about your role?

You have to be physically in shape all the time. And, at Strandfontein, we have a history of physical training. Simon’s Town, Gordon’s Bay and most of the other stations have harbours. We don’t. We have to beach-launch our vessels. This means running the vessel down the slipway, onto the beach, into the water, through the waves and then physically pulling the vessel up again. So, physical strength and stamina are crucial. Another challenge is that you have to get in the water and leave the comfort zone of the boat. That’s

where it gets even more dangerous. I’m not saying that being on the boat isn’t dangerous; I’m just saying that the danger level increases tenfold in the water.

How do you feel about being voted Centrum Guardian of the Year?

I’m extremely proud. It’s a huge achievement in my life. I want to say a big thank you to my station and to all my seniors and crew who helped train and get me to the point I am today. I did the rescue with their help and with years of experience, they put into me. It just shows that the training paid off in a big way. It doesn’t matter where you come from. Anyone can be a hero.

What happened at the rescue?

It was a normal day, although we had really

strong rip tides. I saw some people in the water who might be in difficulty. I just had my wetsuit on and the rescue torpedo buoy with me. I got to the first guy and swam him in. As soon as I could stand in the surf, I gave him a push and let the wave take him out. I immediately went back for the next one. And then I went back for the third one. My body was physically exhausted.

What happened when you realised there were four more people in the water?

I went back in! I pushed my body to limits that I never knew I had. All of a sudden, the swell picked up from two metres to about four or five metres. Even our boat suffered some damage. I swam out to the first three and got them out. I could see the seventh guy, but he was just in the current going a

little bit faster than I could swim. He looked me straight dead in my eyes and he shook his head. And I shouted, ‘No, just hold on!’ I tried to go under. The water was so murky I couldn’t see anything. That was the last I saw of him. If it wasn’t for my torpedo buoy, I probably would have drowned myself.

How did you feel not being able to have rescued everyone?

I found it very hard to deal with and blamed myself. He was not too far from me in the water, but the currents and conditions meant I could not reach him. Had the situation been different, who knows, I could’ve died or not saved the others. It took me a long time to come to terms with the loss. And, although I did manage to save six lives, I could not stop thinking about the one person I couldn’t save.

What advice would you give to someone who wants to become a lifeguard or rescue swimmer?

If you have a passion for the water and saving lives, go for it. If you’d like to be a rescue swimmer, start as a lifeguard. You’ll be a candidate, and they’ll teach you the basics. From there, they’ll teach you how to do rescues, how to look at a beach and identify dangerous areas, and so on. And, from there you can progress. If you want to join the NSRI straight away, you can go to www.nsri.org.za, see what rescue station you live closest to and get hold of that station commander. They’ll train you from the bottom up. As rescue personnel, some people you save and some you can’t. But to save a life is one of the best feelings you can ever have. 🙌

To learn more about Robin’s inspiring story, go to www.centrumguardians.com.