

# Surfers save father, son in heavy seas

By Kim McGuire  
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WRIGHTSVILLE BEACH — It was raining over rough seas when 5-year-old Barrett Earney tumbled backward off the end of Johnnie Mercer's Pier Sunday evening.

Within seconds the boy's father, Charles Earney, scrambled 35 feet down slippery pilings to the water where his son was bobbing amid 6-foot waves.

The elder Earney pulled the boy to him, and the pair clutched the beams of the pier as the breakers pounded over their heads.

Fishermen from above and surfers in the water screamed instructions in efforts to rescue them. The stranded father was not a strong swimmer, and the waves washed him and his son under six or seven times.

Finally, four surfers put the small boy and man onto two of their boards and carried them safely to shore.

The father and son were taken by Ogden Rescue to Cape Fear Memorial Hospital where they were treated and released. Both suffered scrapes on their arms and legs, and Charles Earney received stitches in his feet from where barnacles cut him.

At home safely Sunday night, the father recalled his feelings during the incident.

"When he was going over the side, the only way to describe it is sheer panic," said Earney, a Wrightsville Beach resident who is an accounting professor at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington.

Earney and his son were taking an after-dinner walk on the pier, as they have many times before, when young Barrett slipped on the wet deck, under the railing and out of sight, he said.

"I'm not a great swimmer, so I couldn't dive in," the father said. "In any other circumstance, I can't imagine going over the edge (and climbing down) because I'm such a weak swimmer and the surf was so rough."

Once in the water, the father said, "The most scary part was when I didn't have him in my grasp. He grabbed my arm, then one time I almost lost hold of him."

Earney expressed thanks to the surfers for their help: "I'm afraid the story would have ended a whole lot differently if they hadn't been there."

Wrightsville Beach Police Officer George Wesson answered the emergency call at 6:51 p.m. He called the surfers' efforts "heroic."

One of the rescuers was Jerry Hendrix, 20, of 425 Tanbridge Road in Wilmington, who said he was surfing near the pier when he saw the child fall.

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"I saw him fall, but it was kind of rough and we couldn't see him after that," Hendrix said. The father went after the boy immediately, Hendrix recalled: "I guess he went on instinct."

Hendrix and another surfer, Bobby Brooks of 138 Ludlow Drive, fought the heavy seas as they swam over to the father and son. Then they put the boy on a board

and paddled him in.

"The little boy was scared to death," Hendrix said.

Only after the boy was rescued did onlookers realize the man was not a swimmer, so two other surfers helped the father to land.

Randall Simpson, 19, of 3631 Stratford Blvd., and James Fletchner, 21, of 5024 Hunt Club Road, saved the 35-year-old man.

Simpson, echoing the sentiments of the other surfers, shrugged off the hero title. "I think we did what everybody else would have done in that situation," he said.