

## Dr. Play goes toe-to-toe with a formidable foe

*Ken Beebe battles Parkinson's with wit and grit.*

By **Barry Stringfellow** - September 30, 2015



*Ken Beebe launches a plug into the surf at Norton Point. — Photo by Barry Stringfellow*

With September's first blast of cold air at his back, Ken Beebe worked the surf at Norton Point late Sunday afternoon, lashing the water with a fluorescent orange pencil popper lure. Although he was casting from a sitting position in a low-slung beach chair and gripping his pole with tremulous hands, his lure arced well over the breaking waves.

Ken was sporting a new purple Derby hat with registration pin attached. He's fished the annual Martha's Vineyard Striped Bass & Bluefish Derby for 20 years, and although he's a very accomplished fisherman, he's never been on "the board" — the running tally at the weigh station that shows the top three fish landed in each category.

It looked like a promising night to break that streak. Baitfish were jumping close to shore, en masse. Dusk was rapidly approaching. Terns were scanning the water in increasing numbers.

But the bluefish weren't cooperating.

Ken switched from the orange pencil popper to a red and white Roberts Ranger. "The best one for blues," he said. His shaking hands struggled with the snap swivel, but he eventually succeeded.

Ken was an avid fly-fisherman for many years until Parkinson's disease left him unable to tie the delicate knots that are required, but it has not put an end to spin casting, which he does three or four times a week during the season. He used to fish alone in the predawn hours, but his increasingly tentative balance put an end to that.

"Laura doesn't like getting up at 4 am to go fishing," he said, referring to his wife of 48 years, who was working on a quilt while he fished. A self-confessed "obsessive quilter," Laura's stitching won second place at the Ag Fair this year, and first prize the year before.

When Ken lands a fish, Laura will put down her quilting and help him out. "I'm also the Sherpa," she joked, as she took a bucket of lures to him.

Laura also is a translator. Sometimes Ken's sentences are loud and clear; oftentimes they are not. Laura has a keen sense of when his words don't land, and she glides in and out of a conversation as needed.

### **Always a wise guy**

Parkinson's is a cruel disease. It slowly inflicts debilitating tremors, sudden fits of muscle rigidity, and can even compromise a person's ability to blink, or to swallow, or to smile. It has taken away Ken's ability to drive, and his ability to fly-fish, and it's slowly robbing him of his ability to walk. It has not, however, robbed him of his mischievous grin.

"I was always a wise guy," he said, taking a break from casting. "None of the teachers in my elementary school would take me twice. I spent a lot of time in the principal's office. When I was a principal and kids were sent to me, I'd say, 'Don't tell me a story, because I've already used it.'"

Ken was a school principal in New Hampshire until his school burned down. He'd never been to the Island when he applied for a job at the Tisbury School. "I didn't even know you had to get a boat to get here," he said. Although the job went to longtime principal Alan Campbell, Ken took the assistant principal job.

When his position was eliminated, Ken worked for the telephone company on the mainland, first in the Boston area and later in Vermont, where he continues to maintain a home. When Ken was 55, the shaking and tingling in his arm was diagnosed as Parkinson's disease.

"That's when I retired," he said. "I wanted to go places. I wanted to play."

### **Dr. Play opens Island practice**

Ken and Laura moved to the Vineyard full-time in 1999, and when he registered his Jeep in Massachusetts, he got "Dr. Play" license plates. The "Dr." comes from his doctorate in education, which he earned at the University of South Dakota. "We lived there for three years," he said. "It's not exactly the best place for a liberal from the East Coast. And I missed the saltwater."

Ken has a long and deep connection to the beach. It's where his father taught him to fish in his native Fairfield, Conn., and it's where he met Laura. The back bumper on his Jeep has a rainbow of oversand permits, and a "Ken's Sandbox" bumper sticker, which he had made after a friend commented on the copious amounts of Chappy sand that always covered the floor.

The "Play" in Dr. Play comes from a core belief Ken embraces, as much as his body will allow. The back of his Dr. Play business card, which he reckons he's given out thousands of times, reads, "Make play a high priority in your life, for if you die tomorrow, no one can play for you but someone can and will work for you!"

The front of the card has his contact information, and two small drawings — one of a fisherman landing his quarry, the other of a telescope.

"It was the closest I could get to a spotting scope," he said, referring to the favored tool of bird watchers. Dr. Play is also an avid birder, and every year he and Laura participate in the Island bird count, usually done the Saturday after Christmas. He's also taken birding trips to Florida, California, Texas, and Arizona, since his diagnosis.

### **Attitude is everything**

In June 2004, Ken was one of the first people to undergo a relatively new procedure called "deep brain stimulation" at Dartmouth Hitchcock Hospital in New Hampshire. The procedure involved drilling through the skull and placing an electrode in the brain, which required him to be awake so doctors could ask questions to determine if the electrode was positioned correctly.

"Since I was one of the first, they didn't know how it was going to turn out," Ken said. He described the results as "miraculous." He was not as effusive about the results from a subsequent surgery in 2011. Yet Dr. Play remains committed to his regimen.

"Attitude is more important than anything," he said. "You have to be proactive. If you don't get out and see people, [Parkinson's] will eat you alive. That's why I love to fish. You always meet interesting people."

Last year Ken took his third trip to Alaska to fish with his son Chris. "A plane took us to a boat, and we went way into the wilderness. We saw grizzly bears every day," he said with a large grin.

The father-and-son tandem has also gone whitewater rafting on the Arkansas River, and fished the Blue River and mighty Colorado River while rafting.

### **'This I believe'**

"You can catch a big bass anywhere on this Island," Ken said. "If you want to catch a fish, pick a spot, anywhere you like. Go every day and take five casts. I guarantee the fish will show up at some point."

Ken has a number of maxims, which he's compiled into "This I Believe." A sampling includes:

If something's worth doing, it's worth doing poorly, especially when attempting to learn a new skill.

Tell me what you can do, not what you can't do.

If you can afford it, do it. Today is the rainy day you have been saving for.

Doing nothing is sometimes more important than doing something.

Sometimes you need to make a decision, and if needed, fix it later.

If you're afraid to travel alone, you'll never go anywhere.

One of his favorites is "Never defend a no.

"If you're asked to volunteer for something and you don't want to do it, just say no and leave it at that," he said. "Nobody ever asks you to explain a yes."

"He still says yes a lot," Laura said.

Mr. Beebe remains on one committee. He is a co-facilitator for the Martha's Vineyard Parkinson's support group, also known as "Vineyard Isle Parkinsonians" or "VIPs."

Ellen Reynolds, outreach worker at the Up-Island Council on Aging, estimates the group, which meets the second Monday of every month at 10:30 am at the Up-Island Council on Aging on State Road, has about 25 regular members. "We think there are probably three times that many people with Parkinson's on the Island," she told The Times.

The VIP outreach crews are comprised of a registered nurse, a social worker, and a patient facilitator, a role Ken often fills.

"The model we use on the Vineyard is somewhat unusual," Ms. Reynolds said. "The Boston chapter of the American Parkinson's Disease Association has used us as a model."

Ms. Reynolds had high praise for both Ken and Laura. "He's a special guy," she said. "Laura is also incredible. There's not always a significant other who is so dedicated."

There is also a caregiver's support group that splinters off from the VIP meetings.

"Caregivers usually don't take as good care of themselves as the person they're caring for," Ms. Reynolds said. "It helps to be with others who are going through the same kind of experience."

### **Sunrise and sunset**

The bait was still jumping after the sun set at Norton Point, but no predators had shown up. Asked about his most memorable fishing moments, Ken didn't recount an epic battle with a finned foe. "The sunrise and sunset," he said. "So many people haven't seen the sun rise over the ocean. They're really missing something."

After watching the sunset, Ken called it a day. Laura helped him to his feet and helped him back to "Ken's Sandbox." He tried to gain purchase in the deep sand with his aluminum cane, but it was heavy sledding. A three-foot incline almost toppled them both, but Laura steadied him, and together they made the last few steps to the Jeep.

"I'll probably come back tomorrow or Tuesday," he said, settling his six-foot frame in his seat and catching his breath. "Gimme a call if you want to fish."