

New Jersey

MONTHLY

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Wonder Wheels

Surf chairs and abundant ramps allow the disabled to share in the summer joys of New Jersey beaches.

By [Tammy La Gorce](#) | June 12, 2017 | Appears in the [June 2017](#) issue



Ed Titterton enjoys summer days on the sand in North Wildwood, thanks to a town-supplied surf chair and the help of his wife, Sue. Photo by Jauhien Sasnou

Every stretch of beach has its legends. Sometimes, they're buff 16-year-old lifeguards who make sunburned tweens swoon. But sometimes, they touch hearts in a different way. Take Ed Titterton and Garrett Coyne.

Titterton, 66, has been spending summers in North Wildwood since he was two. By then, he already had been diagnosed with cerebral palsy, a disease that eventually cost him the use of his legs. He has never stopped traversing the sand to make his way into the chilly Atlantic from the town's 15th Avenue lifeguard station. Decades ago, it was with the help of family members strong enough to carry him to the water's edge and settle him into a beach chair. But for the past 20 years, less burly loved ones, including his wife, Sue, have had an easier means of situating Titterton in the bubbling surf.

"Surf chairs have changed everything for him," says Sue, a semiretired special-education teacher in Philadelphia, where the couple lives during the school year. Ed's speech is limited; Sue communicates for him.

Surf chairs—rustproof wheelchairs with extra-wide tires—are designed to be pushed easily in the sand. They have been making tracks on the Jersey Shore for about 20 years, says Burt Brooks, a spokesman for Easterseals New Jersey. The organization picks up beach-bound people with disabilities from satellite locations around the state during summer months, drives them to nearby New Jersey beaches, and helps them secure surf chairs for long days on the sand (visit nj.easterseals.com for more information). The chairs are available at many Jersey beaches free of charge; often they're donated by local businesses or people who can afford the price tag, which can exceed \$900.

Titterton's summers have been made more enjoyable by surf chairs; his wife's are less arduous.

"My skin is not cut out for long days in the sun," says Sue. Her husband is able to ride his electric scooter from their North Wildwood rental to the lifeguard station at the beach. There, he can park his scooter and transfer to a surf chair. "Usually he'll spend the whole day on the beach," says Sue. "There's a whole community of his fellow beach fanatics down there. Everybody knows him."

Surf chairs preceded Titterton's fellow beach legend, Garrett Coyne, to Ocean City. But that's because Garrett, who lives in Gilbertsville, Pennsylvania, is only six.

Garrett has a rare neurologic disorder called Batten disease. He is blind, cannot walk, has severe seizures and is afflicted with dementia. He is not expected to live beyond early childhood.

Garrett's grandparents, Laura and Jim Link, have been spending summers in Ocean City for more than 40 years. They wanted Garrett, who was diagnosed in 2014, to experience the salt air and sense of freedom they've always enjoyed at the Shore.

In recent years, Laura Link had observed people using surf chairs. "I never guessed that my family would need to use one," she says. But she's glad she took notice. Prior to last summer, she called Ocean City Recreation Department supervisor Kristie Fenton for details about the city's surf-chair program.

"She helped us reserve a nice chair for my grandson, which we picked up and used for 14 days," says Link. "Navigating the sand was no problem. The large wheels worked well. Of course, Garrett only weighs 45 pounds, so using the ramps to the beach was easy."

The surf chair opened up a new world of sensations to Garrett.

"The use of the pediatric surf chair provided him the opportunity to enjoy the sounds of the beach," says Link. "He could experience the awesome waves crashing, the seagulls squawking, the joy of beachgoers' conversations and laughter. Being able to use the surf chair brought a very sick little boy and his family much happiness."

He and his grandparents have the town to thank.

"The beach towns are just taking it on themselves," says Brooks. "New Jersey is really quite progressive when it comes to addressing the needs of people with disabilities. The kind of beach access we have is a wonderful example." (While the Americans With Disabilities Act requires all-access restrooms and ramps for beach access, there is no federal requirement to provide surf chairs.)

Many Jersey beaches also provide mats on the sand for easy wheeling. Most municipalities recommend calling ahead to reserve a surf chair, especially on busy summer holiday weekends. Use of surf chairs is generally free, with some towns requiring multiple forms of ID with reservations.

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