

## **Gunter, Loretta: Always a Family Beach** <sup>[1]</sup>

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## **Loretta Gunter: Always a Family Beach**

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) <sup>[2]</sup>," *News & Observer*. Published 8/10/2003. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

Late on a recent Saturday night, the boardwalk at Carolina Beach, 15 miles south of Wilmington, was hopping. Beach music filled the night air. Children were playing gleefully in the arcades and grandmothers were playing bingo. Across from a dance club and bar, a Methodist church's puppet ministry was entralling a crowd of youngsters. Evangelists, bar patrons and everybody else was lined up out the door at Britt's Donut Shop. It was a beautiful, dreamy evening on one of the state's last oceanfront boardwalks.

At the Surf Side Bar, where she has been the proprietor for 31 years, a stately 58-year-old, Loretta Gunter, shared a bag of doughnuts with me and told me about the history of the boardwalk. Standing by an MIA-POW banner and memorials to regulars who have died over the years, she could not hide her fury at the town's recent proposal to "clean up" the boardwalk and bring in more high-end development. One plan calls for replacing the boardwalk, including the Surf Side, with a parking deck.

"They're saying they want to make this a family beach," she told me. "It's always been a family beach."



**Loretta Gunter.** Photo by Chris Seward, 2003. To request permission for the use of this photo to purchase a print, please contact the *News & Observer*.

When I first started coming to Carolina Beach to spend any time at all was in 1962. We would go upstairs to The Plaza, the ballroom. It's called Club Tropics now. That's where the shag started, and I have seen the Zodiacs, the Buttercups, a  
When I first opened the Surf Side in 1971, the boardwalk was rowdy. There were 22 bars. Twenty-two bars! There were a lot of Marines, a lot of guys from Fort Bragg. They kept things under control, but you know, we had a lot of people. At 9  
I can tell you what was here back then. There was the rec hall on the corner. It was like a big pool hall but it also served food. That's where most of the teenagers hung. On the corner was the Landmark Restaurant, which it still is. Over on the  
Next to that was Allan's Beach Wear, and on the corner of that was a T-shirt shop. As you go to The Plaza, downstairs was Elle's. It was a big bar, and they had go-go dancers. As you're coming back on this side, they had the ring-the-bell thi  
Then Mrs. Dale and Mr. Dale had all these little games like pick-a-duck, throw the darts, the basketball toss. On the other side was where the rides were. And then there was a bar, and then there was a bar, and then there was another bar, a  
My favorite thing used to be to ride the chairlift to the end of the pier. It went out on the very edge of the pier and came back, and you got on it up here where there used to be rides. So you could hit the rides, go get on the chairlift, then come  
When I first came here, the boardwalk was a very, very busy place. Used to, say for instance, Azalea Festival weekend, you had to have somebody on the door. You could let two in, two out, four in, four out. My crowd would be lined this way  
They didn't have all the hotels in Wilmington, so when everybody got through partying at the Azalea Festival, they had to come to Carolina Beach. There weren't enough rooms for everybody here either. They'd sleep right on the beach. You c  
I do a lot of birthday parties and wedding receptions, but I also do a lot of benefits. I'm half Cherokee and I lived above the reservation off and on through my childhood, and I know what poverty is. So when I see somebody that doesn't have e  
Patty had cancer and no insurance. She would sit right there in that corner. She did not want to go the doctor for nothing. Trying to make her go to the doctor, I'd say just all kind of ugly things to her. But you know, she told me, she said, "You  
We've had a lot to die that comes in here. See those pictures on the wall with the birds? Those all represent somebody that was here and died. Regulars. When we do a memorial service, we go down here to the gazebo or either the end of th  
On the boardwalk you meet all kinds of people, all walks of life -- the good ones, the bad ones, the neat ones, the shaggy ones. I have bikers that come in here. I've had the Hell's Angels in here. I've had the Outlaws in here. You'll see little b  
Most people don't want to mess with me anyway. I've been the bouncer 31 years and, honey, I always tell the guys, trust me, I can rumble. I can get down and dirty with the best of them. Don't let this little lady fool you.

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