

Charles Hurts His Knee
Kurt Arehart - March 2023

Charles sits with his leg up, in muted pain, a large knee brace clumsy on his bare leg. Less than an hour ago he had for the fifth day in a row been carried down onto the beach by able-bodied young family members who have been happy to perform this service so Charles can drink in the daily family encampment. His folding beach chair, in which he was carried, occupies a prime position under one of several shade canopies, in easy earshot of the family conversations around him. His grandchildren swirl around him bickering loudly, lost in their own petty grievances, be it sand thrown or castle mashed, oblivious to his injury or pain.

He smiles broadly.

On most days he would be irritated at their selfishness, correcting them sharply.

Not today.

The extended family poured in from many points: Florida, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Kentucky, and with some still living close enough for an easy day trip from the Philadelphia area. Ocean City, New Jersey, founded on a religious tradition and with gambling and alcohol prohibited from the outset, had long been an Arehart family vacation spot as far back as the 1930's. Each generation's fond childhood memories kept the family coming back in hopes of making more. After a pause in the 70's and 80's, a large annual family reunion sprang back to life in 1994 and in 1996 was still going strong.

The Arehart clan was large, with more than twenty people coming in most years, and a three-story house was rented for the week, packed tight with overflow sleeping on couches and air mattresses.

Three blocks from the sand on 7th Street, parking was a constant challenge, with nearby curb spaces a great prize. Check-in was at 2 P.M. and triggered a frenzy of action as cars pulled up and unloaded into the house with a week's worth of clothing, linens, food, and beach toys of every description. If a nearby curb-side parking spot opened up it was pounced upon with young adults or a matriarch guarding the space until a family car could claim it, likely for the duration of the week. With other large groups up and down 7th Street doing pretty much the same thing, the action was fast and frazzled, and maybe just a bit aggressive by the mild standards of Ocean City. The Arehart clan had plenty of adults on hand and specialization quickly developed: some hauled bags up flights of steps, some jockeyed cars, some held parking spots, and some corralled our many young children safely on the front porch. And through it all, other cars prowled the street seeking to dock for the week.

And then we were done. All moved-in and parked, and it was only 4 P.M. Maybe time for a quick visit to the beach before dinner, but not the full encampment. Ten of us agreed to change into swimwear and walk the three blocks east to the wide Ocean City beach to wade or maybe get fully into the chilly water, or maybe just sniff the good salt air and have a look.

A full family beach encampment would wait for the next day, when the big effort would be justified by hours of time on the sand.

The Arehart beach attack was a thing to behold. All sorts of carts and wagons were used to haul heavy shade canopies, seating, playpens, picnic coolers, sand toys, water toys and various innovations to keep our very young and our elders shaded and comfortable for the day. Folks would stop and watch us with amusement and some envy as we briskly milled about and assembled our daily village. Some of the shade canopies were old and basic and resembled puzzles with all the loose parts that had to be organized and assembled just so. This required much coordinated effort and calling out for specific poles or plastic joints. An Erector Set you got to sit under when complete. We complained a bit but really enjoyed the team effort.

And no matter how much good nutritious food was prepared and carried to the beach, there was often the need of boardwalk delights like Johnson's caramel popcorn, or Mack and Manco pizza, or Curly's fresh-cut french fries drizzled with cheese whip. Mostly it was the young who spent their beach money on such delicacies, but the adults dipped in on occasion. So did the gulls. If you did not guard your fries carefully during transport back to camp, air assault was likely.

Long swims were had. And novels read. And cut-throat games of Four Square played to exhaustion. And sandcastles built. And occasionally Uncle Kurt would attempt a serious sand sculpture. One year Kurt and his band of young helpers went for a full-size mermaid. She came out so well that a minor scandal erupted, solved only when she was properly dressed in seaweed. Ocean City is a family resort.

But this was late on our Saturday arrival day, so no encampment. Just ten or so of us walking down unburdened for a first visit to the sand. Even so, there were plenty of adults to look after any of our children who might get in the surf.

At 4 P.M. on a Saturday, the beach crowd was light. The fresh crop of one-week vacationers were mostly still moving in, and many of the long term vacationers had packed up and left the beach for the day.

The surf was relatively strong, with swimmers and rafters getting long, quick rides on Ocean City's well-made waves. At 7th Street, the beach fades down into the water at a very shallow angle and the waves often break more than 100 feet out before continuing their rush to shore.

You can wade out 50 feet and still be only knee-deep between wave surges. And the sandy bottom is remarkably clear of sharp objects. This all combines to make for great body surfing, and even better inflatable raft riding.

In that time, a local on-beach rental kiosk offered umbrellas, canvas lounge chairs, and heavy-duty inflated rafts. These rafts were built for the ages of thick rubberized canvas with both ends coated in extra layers of tough rubber to extend life in their sandy, abrasive world. And they were well inflated to form a rigid and formidable float toy. A young child riding one of these heavy floats could catch any wave almost effortlessly and enjoy a long and thrilling ride, but not have much control along the way. It was always good to get out of the path of a child on a raft. An adult catching a strong wave on such a raft could run over a casual wader like a runaway truck. A waist-deep wader depended on raft riders to be careful and avoid catching a wave straight into someone, but constant vigilance was a good idea.

Charles was an athlete back in the day, running track and playing some football. And later, as an educator, he coached a variety of high school sports. While the realities of working life and parenting left little time to stay fit and active, he still saw himself as a robust, fit man of 63. Age was making his body tissues thinner and more brittle, but no one likes to think about things like that, particularly on vacation.

Charles had not come to swim that afternoon, only to watch several of his grandchildren who needed to play at the water's edge after enduring a long drive and the move-in process.

"Don't go out any farther!", he called out over the booming surf.

"Stay close to me!"

"Watch out for that raft!"

As each wave rushed past foaming white, he turned sideways to reduce his surface area to the moving water and more easily keep his balance.

The vigilant grandpa with eyes on his young charges did not see the raft heading for him. A boy of ten, too young to understand his responsibility yet big enough to be riding in fast on his heavy raft, he caught Charles without warning, slamming into the side of the left knee that Charles had forward.

Charles was not warmed up. Not stretched and supple. Far from it, the tendons and ligaments of his knee were chilled. And so when the heavy raft slammed into the outside of his knee, it buckled-in and his medial collateral ligament tore.

Kurt was nearby watching his nine-year-old son, and saw the collision too late to offer warning. The boy got off his raft, and a little annoyed that the grown-up had not got out of his way, picked

up the raft and started back out for another wave. Charles was obviously in pain, and set about trying to walk it off. But the pain was sharp.

“You OK?”

“I don’t know.” Another attempted step. “No.”

Charles and Kurt called the children out of the surf and placed them in the care of another family adult.

“Can you walk back to the house?”

“Sure.” Another attempted step. A wince of pain. “No.”

“OK. You stay here and I’ll get my car and bring it right up to the boardwalk.”

Charles had always been a clever, witty, tough-guy sort, one who would normally push through some discomfort rather than inconvenience others. If he was OK with Kurt’s plan, then he was really hurt. Kurt ran the three blocks back to the house where his car was parked and brought it close. Charles and his wife Pat climbed in.

“What do you want to do? Go back to the house and try icing it?”

“No. I heard something pop when that kid hit me. Something must be torn. We better head into Somers Point to the Emergency Room there. Sorry to wreck your first day at the beach.”

As a former high school coach, Charles knew his knee anatomy. If he thought he tore something, then he probably did. And it was just like him to apologize through his pain to Kurt for the trouble. So they drove south to 9th Street and then northwest across the Route 52 bridge to Somers Point on the mainland.

The ER seemed quiet enough on this Saturday afternoon. Not a lot of shootings or knife-play or overdoses in this time and place. Charles checked-in with the receptionist and settled in to wait along with Pat and Kurt. Maybe he would be called back soon for his consultation and x-ray imaging. A diagnosis, a compression wrap, a brace, some crutches and some pain killer, and back out to Ocean City they would go.

A few hours ticked by. Kurt and his wife Nancy were deep into the open adoption process, hoping for a second child to raise, and Kurt, Charles and Pat spent the waiting time discussing the many challenges and nuances of open adoption, where the birth mother has selected the adopting family and has negotiated some access to the child.

The receptionist: “Charles Legge? They can take you back now.”

Charles started to rise from his chair.

The door to the ER reception burst open.

“Help! Help us! We need a doctor!!”

A man of 35 rushed in with a small boy in his arms, maybe 3 years old. The boy was motionless in the man’s arms, eyes closed. The man was closely followed by a woman with an infant in her arms and three more children in tow, ranging in age from 5 to 7. All were in shock, and terror was all over them. The children whimpered in fearful confusion. The father and mother were laser-focused on getting immediate help.

The ER doctor: “What happened?”

Father: He was hit by a car! I don’t think he is breathing. Help us!”

“How fast was the car that hit him?”

“I don’t know! Maybe 25. He ran out into the street between parked cars while we were unloading. Help him!”

Mother, in misery: “He was only out of my sight for a second.”

The ER staff sprang into motion, the unconscious child was placed on a gurney and rushed back into the treatment area. Forgotten for a moment, a stunned Charles, eyes wide, settled back down in his chair.

The father, mother with infant and three siblings huddled in one corner of the waiting room, helpless. The father and mother did not speak, each drawn inward. The young children knew only that something bad was happening, with no one to comfort them. No one to explain.

In five minutes a nurse came out.

Nurse, in a hushed tone: “Folks, please come with me. You’ll be more comfortable in our private waiting room.”

Father: “How is he? Is he gonna make it? Please tell me. Is he gonna make it?”

Nurse, in the same hushed tone: “We don’t know yet. We are doing everything we can.”

She escorted the family to a small private room adjacent to the room we sat in.

Ten minutes later a grim-faced doctor walked down the hall and entered the private waiting room. “I hate this part of the job”, he thought to himself.

Seconds later the mother’s animal wailing raised up from that room, the sound of pure loss. The children cried in fear and confusion.

The father stood silent, lost and bewildered.

The father and mother were each retreating to an individual place of survival; A place where this horror was not their fault. At a primitive, wordless level, each fell into: “The blame must fall elsewhere, or I cannot survive this.”

A lifelong hate was forming in that waiting room. One life lost. Many more ruined.

Their house was afire; And we could not look away.

Five days later Charles is in the beach encampment on his folding chair, his braced leg propped up on a cooler, family chatter all around.

Charles's young grandchildren have been on the beach for hours and are tired, hungry and beyond petulant. As they do battle in the space under the canopy where he is seated, one child stumbles into him, jarring the leg.

The report of pain is sharp and he inhales sharply.

Then he smiles. This pain is temporary.