

# Born Lucky

## An Appreciation: Christopher Cook Gilmore (1940-2004)

CHRISTOPHER COOK GILMORE, A LONGTIME contributing editor at *New Jersey Monthly*, lived nearly all his life a block from the beach in Margate, and over the course of 63 years the location defined him. “Born lucky,” he described himself in these pages not long ago, a nod to the early good fortune that enabled him to spend his days on a barrier island off the South Jersey Shore, set loose to explore the myriad wonders contained within and the bays, marshes, and smaller islands beyond. Growing up, Chris worked many summers as a life-guard, the only regular job he could ever stomach. He liked to say that he took the measure of a man by how much time he spent on the beach. A competitive sailor, he kept two Hobie cats on the beach near his home and a garvey named *Moët* docked nearby. A few summers ago we titled his Exit Ramp essay “Confessions of a Beach Bum,” and he wore the handle proudly.

He looked the part.

He was tall, 6-foot-2, and slender, with sun-bleached blond and gray hair that nearly hung to his shoulders. His irrepressible spirit made him something of a pied piper, whose wide orbit of friends included many who were, like me, a generation younger. His wife, Anita, thought of him not as a father figure or older brother to his younger admirers; he was more like a naughty uncle.

Chris could recite from memory more Shakespeare than I will ever read. Before dinner one night on Long Beach Island, he raised a toast with a spontaneous recitation of a love sonnet from the Bard. He was an inveterate explorer. If it wasn't Absecon Island, it was southeast Asia, or Morocco, where he spent most of the past 30 winters, or Paris, where he'd stay for weeks at a time on his way to and from northern Africa. He smiled often—it was a good life, and Chris knew it—with a smile that made you think an angel had just alighted on his shoulder and whispered a racy joke in his ear. I've never met anyone with whom I'd rather empty a bottle of wine.

Poet, novelist, essayist, reporter, Chris was a prolific writer. He wrote several dozen articles for *New Jersey Monthly*, almost all of them based near the beach. His novel *Atlantic City Proof*, a hilarious yarn about a teenage rum-runner in Prohibition-era A.C., should be required reading along the Jersey Shore.

One day last winter in Costa Rica, Chris fell unconscious and had to be rushed to a hospital. After that he stayed in-

side, churning out 28 essays about growing up as a “Shore Boy.” He sent them to me in a green three-ring binder, insisting that each one was pitch-perfect. In June we published “First in Flight,” about a friend who bought a flying boat a few years back and became the hit of the South Jersey Shore. The following year the friend's instructor died when his own flying boat malfunctioned and crashed.

Chris's demise seemed equally swift. Upon his return from his winter abroad, doctors found a brain tumor. They operat-



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ed, but to no avail. When Chris died June 29—born in summer, he died in summer—he left friends on three continents. Two nights later, more than a hundred of them gathered on the beach in Margate. One of his Hobie cats was pulled to the center of the beach. There was music, poetry, eulogies, and burning incense, and then we all held candles, fitted inside paper bags filled with sand, and followed Anita to the water, where she spread some of her husband's ashes into his beloved Atlantic. Afterward, there was a reception—a party, really—in the big house on Atlantic Avenue. I lost track of how many people told me that Chris had taught them to sail. Around midnight, a handful of friends gathered in the basement bar to share stories. A common theme wasn't just that Christopher Cook Gilmore was a good friend, writer, sailor, adventurer. Each one of us agreed that he had fundamentally influenced the way we chose to live our lives. The basement session finally broke up around 3:30 AM. I suspect that Chris, somewhere out at sea, must have been smiling. 🍷