

Last Ranger / Next Ranger

20 June 2004 - Drowning – Lake Discovery

Summary:

Mr. Joseph Doe
Everytown, US

At approximately 1245 hours, 36-year-old Mr. Doe and his two young sons, ages 5 and 7, were on a Bayliner boat 150 yds from Lake Beach. Mr. Doe climbed up on the boat to put up a canopy when a gust of wind blew him off balance and into the water. He was not wearing a life jacket, however his two sons were wearing theirs. Nearby boaters heard the children's cries for help and made their way to the scene. Mr. Public and his son were canoeing not too far from Mr. Doe's boat and they responded as well. When Mr. Public's canoe got close to the victim, he threw Mr. Doe a life jacket. The life jacket landed within a foot of Mr. Doe, but he was unable to grab it and went under. Mr. Public called 911 on his cell phone while another boater, Angela Any-Woman, pulled alongside Mr. Doe's Bayliner to see if she could help. Ms. Any-Woman boarded Mr. Doe's boat to comfort his children.

Search efforts began around 1300 with the arrival of State Water Commission staff, Discovery County Sheriff's Office, and local rescue crews. Divers from local counties arrived, and boats from State Water Commission were launched shortly thereafter. The search continued until 2100 hours when it was suspended until 0700 hours on June 21. The Underwater Response Team and Fire Department recovered the body at approximately 0955 in about 20 feet of water approximately 200 feet from the shore at Lake Beach.

Last Ranger:

Mr. Doe had launched from Lake Boat Ramp and State Water Commission had physical presence with permanent rangers and seasonal personnel at both Lake Boat Ramp and Lake Beach Day Use Area on June 20. There was no COE presence at Lake Boat Ramp or Lake Beach that day.

Last opportunity to interact with or influence family:

The entrance station to Lake Boat Ramp was open and manned on 20 June 2004 and would have been one of the last opportunities for direct contact by employees of State Water Commission. The entrance station is manned by temporary, non-ranger employees, engaged in fee collection and site information services, however State Water Commission does not expect fee collectors to provide visitors with a water safety message.

On occasion, printed safety materials in both English and Spanish are handed out to visitors. On the entrance station, facing vehicles as they drive into the park, there is a child sized life jacket and a sign that reads "This Is Your Child's Best Friend". An State Water Commission bulletin board to the right of the Lake Boat Ramp provided safety information including "Buoy and Waterway Markings Used at Lake Discovery" as well as COE "Play It Safe" water safety tips in Spanish and English. A COE "It Won't Work If You Don't Wear It!" sign including a picture of a life jacket hangs on a signpost in between the two launching lanes.

As the accident happened quite near Lake Beach Day Use Area, I investigated there for safety information as well. Since the family wouldn't have driven into the recreation area, they would not have seen safety information on the entrance road. The most likely place that the Doe family would have been at Lake Beach is the boat beach. Swimming is prohibited at this beach; it is only for bringing boats ashore for picnicking or to use the adjacent comfort station. There was no obvious safety information at this boat beach or comfort station. It is not know whether the Doe family actually stopped at Lake Beach or not.

Next Ranger:

Mr. Doe had the right idea by putting both his 5 and 7 year-old sons in their life jackets, however, like so many parents on the water, failed to wear his own. This is a common problem at all projects and there is an obvious need for outreach directed at parents for their own good as well as their children's. The COE organizes water safety programs for hundreds of school children each year and programs are also given at State Water Commission Day Use Areas. As children are far more impressionable than adults, these programs are given in the hopes that the children will teach the parents. In light of this most recent drowning, perhaps this is not enough.

Adults are a tough audience to reach and often will not take water safety tips seriously when they are given in the context of their own safety. I am of the opinion that the adult ego is to blame for this. A shift of tactics may be in order for those of us promoting water safety. Perhaps appealing to parents' devotion to their children by reminding them how much their children need them in their lives would work. Mr. Doe's death is a very good example of this. His three young children and the one on the way don't have a father any longer because he didn't think he needed to wear his life jacket. All family and friends of the Doe's stated that he was a strong swimmer, but many adults underestimate the role that panic can play in a situation like this. Mr. Public, the gentlemen who threw a life jacket to Mr. Doe stated in the police report that "[Doe] looked as if he was in a state of panic or shock". Being a strong swimmer couldn't counteract the panic that Mr. Doe must have felt.

This drowning will, or course, re-emphasize water safety efforts around Lake Discovery, especially with the Fourth of July weekend nearly here. More safety banners, and posters will be hung at all recreation areas, and more coloring books and handouts will be

available to the public. The COE and State Water Commission will be at Lake Beach Fourth of July weekend (as well as other weekends throughout the summer) giving water safety programs and handing out materials. All swim beaches at campgrounds and day use areas have life jacket loaner stations, and COE staff will be discussing adding an additional station at the Lake 50 Boat Ramp. Permanent signs at the boat beach at Lake Beach Day Use Area will also be helpful, as there seems to be lack of safety information in the area.

However, these are the same things we've always done, and more strongly worded tips and emotionally appealing messages are in order if we are going to change the adult frame of mind. Scaring our visitors is obviously not what we want to accomplish, but perhaps a bit of shock value is underrated. The cartoon-like water safety posters that the COE National Water Safety Program produces are fantastic for appealing to children, but not to their parents. As for specific messages to grab an adult's attention, I don't have them yet. Now that we have realized a problem though, Lake Discovery staff will be working to come up with new ways of reaching a broader audience.

Rodney Ranger
Lake Discovery