

IVHS grad saves drowning woman

Judy Hoyle

IVN Contributing Writer

Todd Heiller, IVHS Class of 2009 and his friend, Neal Berg, were hailed as heroes on KEZI-TV Springfield July 10. Due to their quick thinking and actions, they saved a woman from drowning in the Willamette River July 9.

Heiller is a 25-year-old painting contractor who lives in Eugene, Oregon.

Heiller's mother, and Illinois Valley resident Susan Boigan said, "My husband, Randy Heiller, and I are very proud of him and also Neal, who is a close family friend."

KEZI News reporter Amber Wilmarth quoting the local fire department said, "Without their help, the situation would have been much worse."

Heiller and Berg routinely go fishing in that stretch of the river and normally would have already left for the day, but they'd gotten a late start and were still there.

"Todd loves to fish and they just happened to be on the river that day. The motor was off and they heard people screaming further down

the river. It took them a couple of minutes to get there, but they got there on time. I feel like that woman is really lucky," his proud mother explained.

As the fishermen approached, a man waved them down. He was in a fallen tree and holding onto a woman whose head was barely above water.

The married couple had fallen out of a pontoon boat into the river. They were not wearing life jackets.

The husband's grip started slipping as the fishermen approached and the woman was almost swept away in the fast moving current.

Heiller said, "If they didn't get that one snag, I'm not sure she wouldn't have made it."

Heiller and Berg were able to grab the woman and pull her to safety.

"I got a hold on her arm and just didn't let go. I was wearing latex gloves because I was fishing, so I was able to hold onto her," Heiller continued.

After the rescue, they brought the couple to the boat ramp at Clearwater Park, where paramedics examined them for injuries. No one had to go to the emergency room.

Remarking on the rescue, KEZI-TV reporter Wilmarth stated, "As is the case with many Oregon rivers, the water in the Willamette is still very cold, and running very fast due to the continuing snow melt in the mountains."

When asked if his life had been any different since the lifesaving event, Heiller replied, "I got \$20 off an oil change because they recognized me from the news report."

He added that he'll be a dunk tank target at an upcoming charity fundraiser at his girlfriend's workplace.

Heiller concluded with, "Ironically, I saved two more people yesterday (July 23). A couple had been in an inflatable raft that popped and they were stuck on a small island in the river. I threw them a 40 ft. rope and was able to pull them in so they could get in their car and go home."

"I hope everyone reading this always wears a life jacket on the river, because it could have been a way different story if this other couple hadn't been wearing theirs."

Heiller explained that due to a December 2016 ice storm, many

trees that fell into the Willamette River are now submerged hazards,

like the one that ruined the inflatable raft.



(Courtesy photo for the Illinois Valley News)

Neal Berg (left) and 2009 IVHS grad Todd Heiller on the bank of the Willamette River.

Neighbors cry foul when local man digs up river

Annette McGee Rasch

IVN Senior Contributing Writer

Concerned residents on both sides of the Illinois River contacted multiple government agencies after Kamron Ismaili hired a backhoe operator to move large quantities of river rock in an effort to stabilize the bank on his property in the 7000 block of Takilma Road June 29.

"They dug a new channel through the center of a gravel bar to divert the water flow away from his property," said Mal Sanford, who lives across the river. "They changed the channel. Then they dug rock out of the middle of the river and swung around and dumped it up next to his deck, which caused most of the sedimentation."

"The whole river turned brown," said Aaron Beckord, another land owner nearby. "The excavation went along about 500 feet of river front and clouded the river with sediment." Residents living several miles downstream also reported the normally clear river turning "milky."

The Oregon Department of State Lands (DSL), the lead agency dealing with Ismaili's infraction, regulates Oregon's streambeds.



(Courtesy photo for the Illinois Valley News)

The view from the other side of the East Fork of the Illinois River during the excavation June 29.

The DSL resource coordinator for this region, Melody Rudenko, explained how many streams and rivers in the area are designated as "Essential Salmon Habitat" which means

the waterway is critical habitual for salmon spawning and rearing.

"Some people still believe that it's OK to remove up to 50-cubic-yards of river material

without a permit, but with the 'Essential Salmon Habitat' designation, that 50-cubic-yards threshold no longer applies," Rudenko said. "There's a zero threshold - so you need a permit or an exemption to move, add or take any materials away in those waters. Basically anything you'd want to do will require a permit."

Ismaili, who embarked upon his project without permits, said he thought he owned the land up to the middle of the river. "That's what I was always told and that's what I believed at the time," he said. "I've learned different now. All the agencies have come and discussed the issues with me and I'm totally cooperating with them now."

But Sanford, a land developer with decades of local experience said, "It's hard for me to believe - in this day and age - that anybody could be ignorant of the fact that there's rules and guidelines about taking heavy equipment in the river."

"You have to plan ahead. You can't just cowboy it in," said agriculture engineer Gordon Lyford, who sat on the Illinois Valley Soil & Water Conservation District for many years.

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