

# Air Currents

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**K**en and Colby Knifong have lived every parent's worst nightmare. They know the terrifying chill of plunging through icy water, bruised and bloody, screaming their child's name. They know the horror of seeing their son's lifeless body pulled from beneath a sunken log. They know the wave of nausea that hits when they recognize the fear shimmering in the eyes of every paramedic, police officer, nurse and doctor—the fear that there's no way this child could survive.

It was a sunny morning last June, and Colby Knifong was outside the family's Enterprise home with her 17-month-old son, Kennisen.

"I bent down to pull a weed," she recalls. "I turned my back on him for just a second."

But a second was all it took. In that instant, Kennisen scrambled down a 20-foot bank, under a fence, and into the frigid creek. When Colby turned around, she felt her blood turn to ice. The family dog sat motionless beside a small, muddy footprint in the creek bank.

Colby hurtled over the fence and down the steep embankment, charging into icy water that surged around her knees. "These logs kept cutting my legs, but I didn't even notice then," she said.

Screaming Kennisen's name, she fought her way downstream as the current pulled at her clothes and slammed her into logs. Seconds passed, with still no sign of her son.

"I ran back to the house and called 911," she said. "Then I ran back out to keep searching."

Steve Rogers, undersheriff with the Wallowa County Sheriff's office, was at his desk when Colby's frantic call came in. With more than 35 years of search and rescue experience under his belt, Steve knew he had to act fast. As he raced toward the Knifong residence with sirens

## GOING UNDER

A toddler submerged for twenty minutes in an icy current.

A desperate family praying for a miracle.

A whole community fighting against hopeless odds.

What will it take to save Kennisen Knifong?

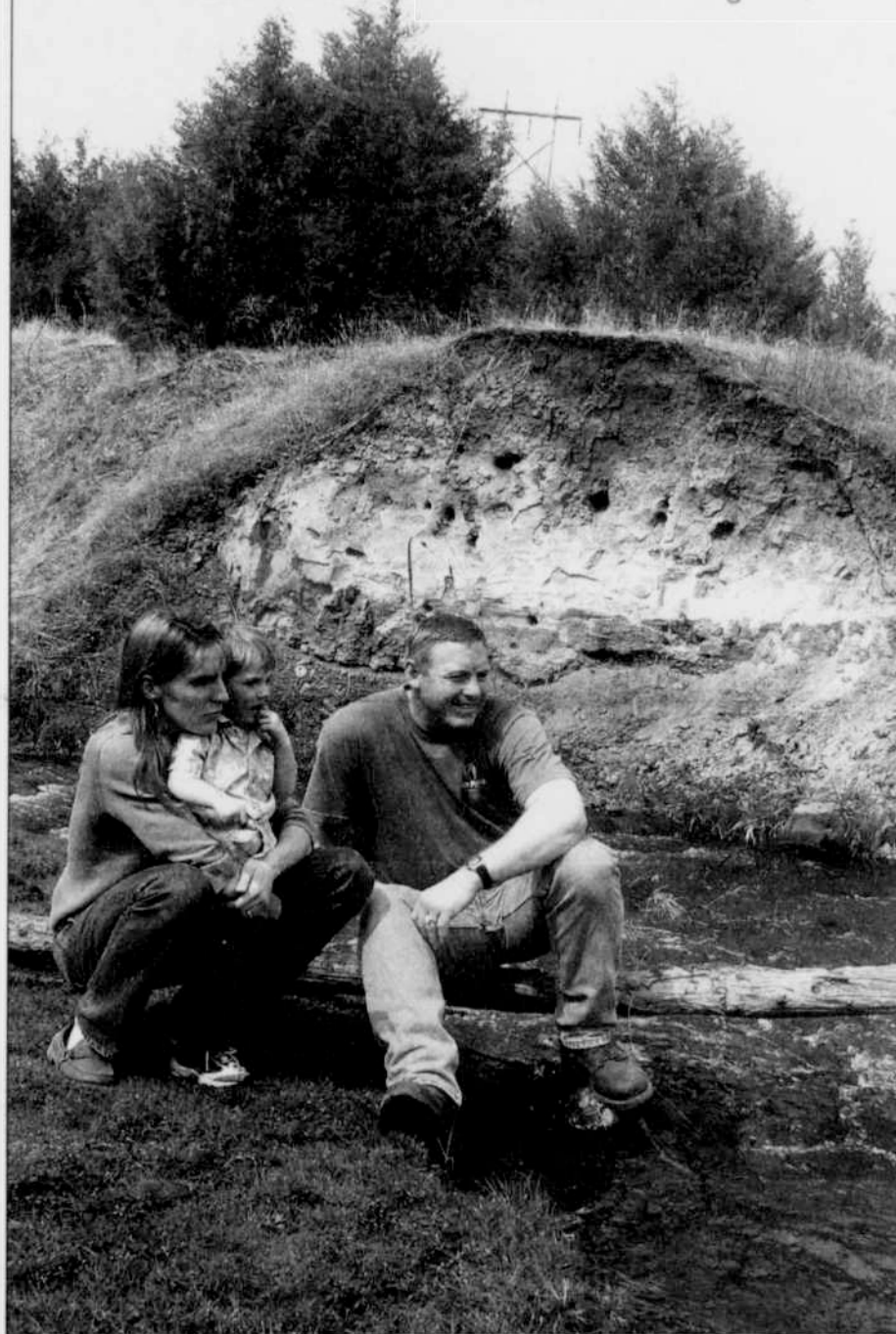


Photo by Gary Fletcher

Colby, Kennisen and Ken Knifong gaze out over the creek that nearly claimed Kennisen's life less than a year ago.

blaring, he passed the familiar truck of an electrician. It was Kennisen's father, Ken Knifong, on his way to a job.

"You just get a feeling in a small town," Ken recalls. "When I saw them turn like they might be headed to our house, I just knew something had happened to Kennisen."

Steve arrived ahead of Ken and quickly

directed his deputy to take Colby inside to search the house in case Kennisen was merely hiding. He had been missing for nearly 20 minutes. Struggling to stay calm, Steve ran toward the creek and looked downstream. Something pulled his gaze to a spot nearly 350 yards from where the dog still sat guarding the point of entry. It was something shiny, something that looked like a fishing lure. Steve ran toward it, fear gripping at him as he realized he was seeing was three small buttons on the front of Kennisen's sweatshirt. It's an image that still burns in the back of his mind.

"He was underwater with his arms floating out like kelp and his eyes fixed and dilated," he said.

Steve grabbed Kennisen and pulled him from the surging creek. He pressed his back to expel any water from the small body. As he prepared to start CPR, Steve looked up to see nearly two-dozen people converging on the scene. From neighbors to paramedics, family to police officers, the Knifongs' house was suddenly a whirl of activity.

Ken stood numbly on the sidelines as people took turns performing CPR on his son. "At that point, I didn't think we were going to make it out of town," he said. "It was the most blue, lifeless body I'd ever seen."

Kennisen wasn't breathing. He had no pulse, and his body was cold and unmoving. As Steve Rogers performed CPR, he tried to squelch the feeling of hopelessness that gripped him. "This kid couldn't have been any deader. He was as blue as his little sweatshirt."

Back at Wallowa Memorial Hospital, Head Nurse Gail Johnson, RN, and Tami Perren, RN, were huddled around the

nurse's station listening to the dispatch call for the hospital's ambulance. When Lowell Euhus, MD, walked by, Gail asked if he'd go to the Knifongs' house.

"I don't usually go to the

HATS OFF

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WALLOWA COUNTY AMBULANCE SERVICE

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