

Aquatic centers devise plans to prevent drowning

By ANTONIO SIERRA
STAFF WRITER

Hermiston and Pendleton's aquatic centers are discussing teaming up to help prevent drowning.

A youth spent swimming saved Pendleton Parks and Recreation Director Liam Hughes' life.

When he was 10 years old, Hughes and his family went on a vacation to a campground near Biarritz, France, a resort town on the country's southwestern coast.

On the first night there, Hughes and his father went on a bike ride on the coast before deciding to take an unplanned swim in the ocean.

But to the two travelers, the opportunity seemed too good to pass up.

"The sun was close to setting but it was a warm night and the ocean just looked (too) inviting not to go for a swim," he wrote in an email.

The tide soon pulled Hughes away from shore, and although his dad was still able to stand up, Hughes was disoriented as he was repeatedly "enveloped in a wall of foamy salt water."

Luckily for Hughes, he grew up swimming in a local river in his native England and practiced four times per week as a part of a swim team.

Hughes swam as hard as he could back toward the shore, using the crashing waves to boost him, and his father was eventually able to help get him out of the ocean.

Hughes shared this story to demonstrate that swimming ability isn't just for leisure, but also a vital survival tool. In a region where lakes, rivers and creeks are bountiful, people never quite know when they're going to be in the water.

He pointed to the drowning of



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan
Lifeguard Elli Nirschl watches over a lap swimmer last week at the Pendleton Aquatic Center.

a 35-year-old Umatilla man on the Columbia River in 2018. While fishing, his son fell into the river. Neither knew how to swim, and although the boy was saved, the father drowned.

Both the cities of Pendleton and Hermiston are interested in educating the public about safe swimming practices. Because even in the relatively controlled environment of a municipal aquatic center, they are discovering a lack of both knowl-

edge and ability.

Hermiston Recreation Coordinator Kasia Robbins said the Hermiston Family Aquatic Center employs 60 lifeguards to monitor its various pools, waterslides and diving boards.

Robbins said some parents are over-reliant on lifeguards to watch their children, leading to several situations per day where lifeguards need to jump into the pool for a save or assist.

"They're a line of defense, but they're not the only line of defense," she said.

Robbins said life jackets are also sometimes used as a substitute for close supervision. While life jackets are important for keeping a child afloat, she said they can often flip a child onto their stomach rather than their back if they go unmonitored.

Robbins said adults often overestimate their child's swimming

ability, so Hermiston is revamping their swimming program accordingly.

Instead of telling parents that their children are capable of "flutter kicks" and "free arms," aquatic center staff are reporting whether their child is at a low, medium or high risk of drowning.

Pendleton is also interested in drowning prevention, and is planning to launch a public outreach campaign in the spring.

He said there's even talk between Pendleton and Hermiston about collaborating. Robbins said Hermiston is interested in filming a public service announcement with Pendleton.

As one of the people who oversees the Pendleton Aquatic Center, Hughes echoed many of the same concerns Robbins did.

He said the ultimate goal of the campaign would be to have all children learn to swim at the same time they learn to walk and to dispel the public of the notion that just because it's a public pool means it's a safe environment.

"We have all seen the Facebook posts of people trying to pet polar bears at the zoo and getting attacked. People wouldn't approach a polar bear in the wild, but because it is in a zoo they think it's safe. The problem is that (the) polar bear has not ceased to be a polar bear just because you put it in the zoo," he wrote.

"The same is true for pools. Parents are cautious letting their kids play in a lake that is 6-foot deep, but don't think twice about letting them in a 6-foot-deep swimming pool. The water did not become less dangerous because we brought it into a public pool. Anytime we are around water it deserves our respect and attention."

June drowning deaths prompt negligent homicide investigation

By PHIL WRIGHT
STAFF WRITER

Carbon monoxide may have played a role in the June drowning deaths of Janice Arsenault and Trenton Williams.

The information came from the affidavit Umatilla County sheriff's Sgt. Rowen Hayes wrote June 26 to obtain a warrant to search for evidence of criminally negligent homicide.

Arsenault, 44, and Williams, 20, went missing June 15 while boating with friends in Lake Wallula on the Columbia River east of Umatilla.

They were on a 21-foot-long blue 2007 Skiers Choice with three other adults, according to the affidavit, and witnesses reported the two were intoxicated. They were chest down on the dive deck at the back when the craft headed to shore. After arriving, the party discovered Arsenault and Williams were not on the boat. A dive team recovered their remains June 17.

Two days later, a witness came forward and told investigators with the sheriff's office the story he read in the news about their deaths did not match what he saw the day they went missing. The sheriff's office



Staff photo by E.J. Harris
A Umatilla Fire Department rescue boat searches the south shore of the Columbia River for missing boaters Janice Arsenault and Trenton Williams in June east of Umatilla.

at the time reported Richard Kirkendall, 41, of Hermiston, drove the boat. But according to the affidavit, Kirkendall was not the only driver.

The witness claimed he stopped in his boat that day to talk with the people in the Skiers Choice. He said he noticed the two people hanging off the dive deck. The affidavit also stated the witness said the boat's owner — not Kirkendall — was driving.

Deputy Jon Roberts asked the witness if he was sure about who had the helm. The witness said he was positive, according to the document. He said he knew the owner of the

boat and did not recognize the other man, referring to Kirkendall.

The *East Oregonian* declined to identify the owner at this time because there have been no arrests or charges in the case.

The boat pulled away with Arsenault and Williams on the dive deck, the witness said, and after the owner cut power to coast to the beach, he thought "he saw someone that was struggling to stay above the water," but it was too far away and saw it only for a split second.

He said he dismissed the image because children were floating on rafts and playing about 30 feet from the same place.

The sheriff's office questioned three others who reported the boat's owner was driving, according to the affidavit, and two of them said Kirkendall only stepped in to take the wheel once law enforcement arrived.

The affidavit also revealed Dr. Rudy Stefancik, the county medical examiner, reported high levels of carbon monoxide were likely a contributing factor in the drowning deaths.

The sheriff's office — at

last report — was waiting on the Oregon State Police crime lab's analysis of blood samples from the victims. Sheriff Terry Rowan did not immediately return a call seeking comment for this report.

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Suzie is approx a year old. She is leash trained. Does not do well in the crate. Is house trained. Suzie is an energetic dog and will need an active family or another dog for her to play with. She does not do well in a car and will need working with on this. She loves the water. Fence needed

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