

The Impossible Rescue That Saved My Life



Garrett Giberson thanks his rescuers, Bill Knight (left) and Ray Scharf, at hospital.

Beneath the water, a trapped youth was starving for air—so two friends took breaths of life down to him!

By GARRETT GIBERSON
as told to Arden Eidell

THE OTHER LIFEGUARD had already pushed up toward the surface of the water. But I didn't move; I hovered at the bottom of the swimming pool a few feet above the dark mouth of the drain.

There was no reason for me to stay. Our job was done. Bill Knight and I had tugged the steel grate off the drain, and now the water from the 120-by-50-foot pool was rushing through the 20-inch opening. Soon the pool would be empty, and we could clean it and then head home for dinner.

I knew I should get going; it was after 7 o'clock. Nevertheless, I hung there a moment longer. There was something fascinating about that round, black, gulping hole in an underwater world where everything else was so still and clear and shimmering bright.

If I had been thinking, it might have occurred to me that the force of the water was greater than usual and that this probably had something to do with the repairing of the drain valve the week before.

But I wasn't thinking; I was just watching—and apparently drifting. For—with a sudden jarring jerk—the force of the rushing water yanked me downward and slammed me into the drain!

The suction wedged my hips and the back of my legs into the hole like a cork in a bottle. My first try at shoving myself out let more water storm in around me, and—to my horror—I was sucked even deeper inside!

For a second, I wondered about drowning. I was trapped 5½ to 6 feet under water in an enclosed pool that was padlocked for the night. But I quickly shook such thoughts from my mind; I realized that the best possible help was within summoning distance.

Bill was still floating in the water above me, and I knew that Ray Scharf, another lifeguard, was working down at the shallow end of the pool. Asbury Park, N.J., is famous for the training it gives the men who guard its pool and beaches. Bill and Ray were experts; they would get me out.

AT THAT MOMENT, Bill glanced my way, so I waved at him. He hesitated a second—probably to decide if I was horsing around or not—and then dived down. He grabbed my shoulders and pulled while I pushed. Nothing happened. We tried again. Still no luck.

Bill rocketed to the surface to get help from Ray. In a moment, they both streaked down toward me.

By that time, I knew I was in real trouble. As Bill and Ray yanked at my arms and legs, I struggled to help them. But I was getting dizzy, and my body quivered with the strain of battling exhaustion.

I had often wondered to myself how a good swimmer could drown. Now I knew. You fight just so long, and then you get unbearably tired. No pain. No past flashing suddenly before you. No terror. Just complete exhaustion.

During tests in the pool, I had been able to hold my breath two minutes. I figure the will to live added another half-minute to my staying power under there. But finally the breaking point came: my breath exploded through my clenched teeth and lips, and the water came in. For a second, the thump-thump-thump in my throat

shook my whole head. Then I blacked out.

Bill and Ray were still trying to tear my body out of the drain when I lost consciousness. They told me later that they continued this for a while, surfacing only when they had to. During one of their quick trips to the top, Ray yelled to Bill: "I'm going to grab a mouthful of air and try to force it into Gary! You try it, too."

Ray doesn't know how this idea came to him; he had never heard of anyone doing it underwater before. But he and Bill put their new lifesaving tactic to work: time after time, they brought the breath of life down to me at the bottom of the pool.

How long did they keep it up? Ray estimates he did it at least 20 times. By going through the same motions again afterward, he found he could make five such trips a minute. That means he and Bill carried air to me for about four minutes.

By the end of the time, they were desperate; my body was turning blue, and I was stuck as tightly as ever. So Bill took a chance: he left Ray alone with me while he made a dash for the drain valve at the side of the pool. It takes about a minute to twist the cumbersome valve the necessary 50 turns; to Bill, it must have seemed like forever.

BILL THEN RETURNED to help Ray pull at what they feared was my lifeless body. The pressure in the pipe equalized slowly; but as it did, the drain's grip loosened and they were able to drag me out. Immediately, Ray pulled my head above water and began breathing into my mouth while Bill rhythmically pumped at my chest. With each cycle, they nudged me a step farther toward the shallow end of the pool.

As soon as they got me there, Bill ran to the nearest phone (in a restaurant about 150 yards away), and Ray continued to give me mouth-to-mouth artificial respiration.

When Bill got back, I was breathing! Ray said I first made a gurgling noise, took a few breaths—and then bit his finger. He had to get a tetanus shot for it.

I guess I must have begun "fighting the water" again as soon as I got a breath back in me. During the ambulance ride, I bit through a plastic tube and a steel clamp (the result: one chipped front tooth). And in the emergency room of the hospital, four men had to hold me down until they could get a sedative into me.

Oddly enough, when I regained consciousness about 3 o'clock the next morning, the first thing I wanted was water. I had a slight case of pneumonia, and my 104-degree fever made me terribly thirsty.

The brush with death that almost ended my life at 19 occurred July 30. Now I am back at Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, Va., where I am a premedical student. There still is some controversy about my rescue. People with lifesaving experience say that Bill's and Ray's underwater breathing couldn't have kept me alive.

But it does seem there is one point worth noting. Scientists say that normally a man can't stay underwater more than two to four minutes without suffering brain damage. By adding up the time it took Bill and Ray to perform each of the parts of my rescue, we estimate I must have been down there at least 7½ minutes—and the only permanent scar I have is a lasting aversion to drainpipes.