



THE KNOWLEDGE BASE

Knowing the Drill

By Frederick S. Carter

Special to Aquatics International

November/December 2002

It was early afternoon on a warm Saturday in the summer. A woman was visiting Thelma G. Spencer Park in Rochester Hills, Mich., with her son, daughter and another little girl.

The woman, we'll call her Lisa, had a minor accident to attend to when her daughter suffered a split lip. At the time, all three children were in the water in front of the main lifeguard stand. The two girls left with Lisa, while her 5-year-old son stayed in the water, a 38-acre, man-made lake.

The lake is the focal point of 130-acre Spencer Park, and our guests travel from Oakland, Macomb and Wayne counties to visit an old-fashioned, flat-water swimming beach. We average 115,000 to 150,000 guests per season. In addition to the beautiful surroundings, we run a clean and safe beach, with a perfect safety record since 1983. On this day, that perfect record was challenged.

Upon returning her attention to the swim area, Lisa did not see her son. She frantically looked into the water and lifeguard Geoffrey Blake, on the right side of the main stand, took notice. Geoff asked if she was missing a child. Lisa said yes, but walked away. Geoff called her back and asked for a description of the boy: 42 inches tall, a nonswimmer. Lifeguard Mark Chrobek, on the left side of the stand, then blew a whistle three times to start our Missing Child Protocol. Our team went into action.



Mark Chrobek (left), Phil Zimny, Geoffrey Blake and Paul McClain, with beachfront coordinator Frederick S. Carter, were honored by the mayor of Rochester Hills, Mich., for their efforts in saving a life.

Spencer Park's Missing Child Protocol

The lifeguard who first learns a child is missing makes sure that a whistle is blown three times, clears the water and gets a complete description, including the child's height, swimming ability (to be taken with a grain of salt), attire, age, hair color, weight, markings, ethnicity and name. The guard then orchestrates the entire following sequence of events from the main

Every minute critical

Geoff remained on the main stand to orchestrate the drill, while Mark grabbed a mask, fins and snorkel, and went into the water to the height of the missing boy, as taught in our protocol. He started to walk the 40- to 46-inch-line parallel to the beach. Another guard, Jen Gibbs, checked the adjacent south area and was going in the water to snorkel. Responding guards from the bench area and break room included Phil Zimny, Michelle Poisson, Paul McClain and Kevin Ogden. Michelle and Kevin snorkeled the deeper water within the main swim area; Phil coordinated a human search chain; and Paul checked behind the kiddie fence.

Mark found the boy face down, on the bottom, 42 inches deep, 75 feet from shore. He was brought up and handed to Phil, who “broke” the boy at the waist to clear water from his throat and stomach on their way into shore. He vomited twice and his airway was cleared. Paul and Phil administered CPR with oxygen to the lifeless 5-year-old. Back-pressure was found on the first attempts to give air and a suction unit was used. Within two minutes, the boy took a gasping, labored breath, which was filled with sounds of fluid and congestion. They continued to give ventilation after a pulse was established. EMS personnel arrived after three minutes and took over.

The boy was treated on site by fire and EMS personnel, with police in charge of the site. He lost a tooth during intubation (inserting a plastic tube down his throat). He was transported to Troy Beaumont Hospital and then moved to Royal Oak Beaumont and placed in the pediatric critical care unit.

Rescue personnel estimated the boy was in the water three to five minutes.

The final outcome? After a two-night stay in the hospital, the boy recovered completely.

Official honors

The most difficult people to find in the water are nonswimmers who have simply wandered out too far. They present very little to the lifeguard’s eye. Their struggles are normally silent, with no cries for help, no thrashing arms or “climbing the ladder” motions, only low heads and rolling shoulders that can’t be seen easily in a cloudy lake.

The boy’s life was saved through the efforts of our diligent staff and our Missing Child Protocol itself, which aggressively rules out a submersion. The save officially goes to all parties involved, but it was clearly Geoff — who went to the mother not once but twice — who saved the boy’s life.

lifeguard tower, concentrating solely on ensuring that they happen in a timely fashion:

- Lifeguards immediately go to the depth of the child’s height and walk the swimming area to rule out the most likely location of a submerged child.

- Lifeguards snorkel or kayak the deep water.

- Lifeguards set up a human chain and start it moving.

- Lifeguards check adjacent areas, outside the swim ropes and behind the kiddie fence.

- Lifeguards also check shoreline drop-off areas near the picnic areas.

- The orchestrating lifeguard visually checks that all these steps are happening, keeps the parent or caregiver down at the tower, directs the human chain and continually announces the description of the child to guests in the park. He also announces the child’s name and asks the child to come to the main lifeguard tower.

- Other park staffers search bathrooms, the concession stand, playscapes, picnic areas, the parking lot, wooded trails, the fishing pier and the trail around the lake.

- The ranger or facility supervisor stays with the caregiver or parent, monitors radio traffic and has the gates locked to prevent egress until the child is found. We allow cars to leave the park after an employee completes a visual check of the vehicle.

- After a set period of time — about five minutes — the county police and/or the dive team is contacted.

This protocol is a work in progress, and is shaped to our physical environment and layout, but can be easily adjusted and implemented at most aquatics facilities. The key is the description, speed, areas searched and the order in which we search.

— F.S.C.

From what records show us, if Geoff had not intervened, Lisa likely would have done what other moms do: hesitate in asking for help.

The four major staffers acknowledged in this rescue were Geoff, 18, for noticing the mother; Mark, 15, for quickly going to the boy's height and finding him on the bottom; and Phil, 16, and Paul, 18, for administering CPR. They were officially recognized by Mayor Pat Somerville and the Oakland County Sheriff Department.

Practice makes perfect

This was the first documented, successful resuscitation of a bather found in a lake by a missing child protocol in as long as drowning records have been actively studied in Michigan.

The purpose of our protocol is simple: to rule out the water as soon as possible. We assume that the missing person is in the water, even though statistics show a very low percentage of missing bathers are ever found submerged. The entire rescue happened in just a few minutes.

This event took place in 2001. Nearly a year later, based in part on conversations between Lisa and her son, it was theorized that the boy did not see his sister leave the water and was searching for her. Michigan drowning reports have cited this behavior, and it is also the finding of our lifeguard service that children often follow other kids into deeper water.

In this instance, the boy lived because we added a step not usually found in any recognized missing child protocol: Upon learning he was a nonswimmer, we immediately went to his height in the water.

For years, we have tested our protocol 30 to 40 times a season. On the 497th time, it paid off.

Epilogue: Mark Chrobek finished the 2001 season, his first as a lifeguard, but did not come back in 2002, feeling the incident hit "a little too close to home." Now, however, he is contemplating a return in 2003. The other three guards did return in 2002.

Frederick S. Carter is the beachfront coordinator, a lifeguard for Thelma G. Spencer Park and a water-safety specialist who has researched more than 4,000 police-investigated drownings, near-drownings and spinal cord injuries. He may be reached at atfscarter@comcast.net.