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Hypothermia played role in death of students

The Jacksonville medical examiner's office has determined the cause of death.

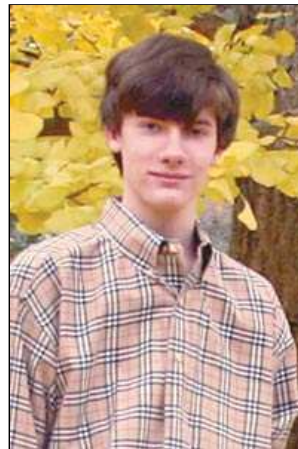
03/02/05

By Diane Wagner/Rome News-Tribune Staff Writer

Two Darlington students on a fatal canoe trip off the coast of Florida died of "hypothermia with terminal aspiration of water," according to the Jacksonville medical examiner's office.

Freshmen Clay McKemie, 15, of Rome, and Sean Wilkinson, 14, of Acworth, got separated from the group in the choppy Gulf of Mexico on Saturday night. Their bodies were found late Monday morning.

"They got cold, and they drowned," said the spokeswoman, who cited medical examiner office policy in withholding her name. The examiner was unable to determine a time of death, she said.



Clay McKemie. (Contributed Photo)

John Burton, a captain with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, said the water temperature was approximately 58 to 60 degrees during the search for the missing boys.

When members of the Floyd County Emergency Management Dive Team encounter water that cold, they limit their dives to 10 minutes, said team member Tracy Hardy.

"You start getting a numbing sensation ... that affects your fingers and arms and your dexterity," Hardy said. "We do our best to get our work done and get out quickly."

Dive team members wear wet suits while exploring riverbeds and underwater bauxite mines for abandoned vehicles, Hardy said.

McKemie and Wilkinson were dressed in casual clothes, like the other six Darlington students who made the trip with professional guide Steve Hall, a Darlington teacher, and Bryan Evans, assistant boys soccer coach.

"We were all wearing shorts, T-shirts, windbreakers and life vests," said Leslie Beninato, a junior who also went on the trip. "We were dressed for the weather."



Sean Wilkinson. (Contributed Photo)

The National Weather Service had issued a boaters advisory warning Saturday morning, but students said they did not know the weather would turn treacherous during their paddle to Coon Island, about a mile off the coast.

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OF ROME

Dwight Payne, father of student Matthew Payne, said he considered it a miracle that the others on the trip survived.

Matthew Payne was among the six who clung to a catamaran in the dark for nearly eight hours while Hall and a student searched for the missing boys and the U.S. Coast Guard searched for them all. Dwight Payne said his son, an Eagle Scout with Troop 113 in Rome, clocked on his stopwatch the time between Hall's departure and the arrival of rescuers early Sunday morning.

"A lot of things he learned in the Scouts helped him during that night," Dwight Payne said.

"Those kids had their hands full keeping that (catamaran) afloat. It's heartbreaking that those boys didn't make it, and I'm sure it was a terrifying and life-changing event for the kids who did."

FUNERAL SERVICES

Funeral services have been arranged for the two Darlington students who died this past weekend during a canoe trip in Florida. The service for Rome's Clay McKemie, 15, will be held at 4 p.m. Friday in Morris Chapel at Darlington School. The service for Sean Christopher Wilkinson, 14, of Acworth, will be held at 11 a.m. Friday at Wildwood Baptist Church in Acworth.

To offer condolences: Visit www.romenews-tribune.com and click on Prayers & Support for Darlington under the Message Board header near the top of the Web page.

TRAGEDY TIMELINE

The following is an approximate timeline of a canoe trip that turned deadly this past weekend. The events and times were reconstructed from interviews with some of the Darlington School students who went on the trip to Florida, 911 tapes and information provided by the U.S. Coast Guard and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission:

SATURDAY

3 p.m.: Eight Darlington students and their two adult guides, Steve Hall and Bryan Evans, begin their trek from the mouth of the Suwannee River in the Gulf of Mexico, using canoes, kayaks and a motorized catamaran raft.

4-5 p.m.: The boats form a line on their way to Coon Island, with Clay McKemie and Sean Wilkinson's canoe at the rear.

6 p.m.: A rope gets entangled in the raft's motor, causing it to malfunction.

7 p.m.: The waves start to pick up as darkness falls, and the group begins to lash the boats to the raft. Clay and Sean are in sight but are drifting away from the group.

7:30 p.m.-8:30 p.m.: Hall takes a canoe out to look for the boys and heads toward the shore for help, all the while using flashlight signals from the boats to keep a visual contact with the two teens.

9 p.m.: Hall returns, and senior Adam Moody volunteers to help him go back out to look for the two teens and try for cell phone service.

9:15 p.m.: The flashlight being used by Clay and Sean fades out.

10:30 p.m.: Hall makes contact with his wife, Christina, in Rome.

11:30 p.m.: Christina Hall, with the help of Floyd 911, gets word to the U.S. Coast Guard.

Midnight: The Coast Guard and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission begins a massive search of the area.

SUNDAY

3 a.m.: A Coast Guard helicopter spots the raft; Evans and the teens with him are rescued.

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5 a.m.: Hall and Moody arrive at Clearwater after being picked up by a Coast Guard helicopter.

MONDAY

11:20 a.m.: The bodies of Clay and Sean are discovered between 10 and 13 miles west of the mouth of the Suwannee River in the Gulf of Mexico.

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