

The Review

Victims identified in park tragedy

LISBON – A Father’s Day kayaking trip down the Middle Fork of the Little Beaver Creek had seemingly come to an uneventful end at Willow Grove Park.

It is what happened after the kayakers were safely on shore that touched off a chain of events that claimed the lives of Todd C. Vadino, 44, of Leetonia, his son, 10-year-old Garrett Vadino, and 14-year-old Carson Bonar of Beloit.

After the kayaks had been pulled to shore on Sunday afternoon, Bonar and the younger Vadino returned to the creek bank to rinse the mud from their

shoes. Vadino slipped on some rocks and fell into the creek just below the dam, with Bonar jumping in after him in an attempt to save his friend. Seeing what had occurred, Todd Vadino jumped in to rescue both of them. All three drowned.

“Obviously, they were avid kayakers and had their own kayaks,” village Police Chief Mike Abraham said of the group of kayakers that included at least one other youth and adult. “But the kayaking wasn’t the problem. To think something as innocent as wanting to wash mud off your shoes ...”

The call was received by the police department just before 6 p.m., and police officer Mike Cherol arrived at the scene within a minute and saw two bodies trapped in the spillway’s undertow. A kayak had been thrown into the churning water for the trio to grab hold of, but to no avail.

Cherol was joined near the dam abutment by officer Jason Sletvold and both began removing their police gear as they prepared to enter the rain-swollen creek, but then thought otherwise. Abraham said that was a wise decision given the stream conditions following more than a week of rain that had turned the normally placid creek into a fast-moving river.

“There was no way. The more people who entered the water, you would have ended up with more victims,” he said.

By then, the Lisbon Fire Department had arrived and, using a rope and retrieval device, were able to pull the bodies from water but on opposite shores. Bonar was not breathing, so Cherol began performing CPR on him and continued until EMTs arrived and took over. Bonar was flown by helicopter to Akron Children’s Hospital, where he died at 11:38 p.m.

The search continued for Garrett Vadino around the dam and downstream, and it also involved firefighters from the Hanover Township, Guilford Lake, Winona and Highlandtown departments, with Highlandtown bringing its hovercraft to use. Some of the Hanover Township firefighters walked and swam the creek from the South Market Street bridge to the bridge at Pondi’s restaurant, according to Lisbon Fire Chief David Lewton.

The search was called off at 11 p.m. because of darkness, but Garrett Vadino's body was found at 2:40 a.m. Monday just west of the state Route 164 bridge by Luke and Adam Newbold, two U.S. Navy SEALs reservists who live near Lisbon. The Newbold brothers had been asked for their help by the Vadino family because Todd Vadino was friends with Adam.

Using their SEAL water gear and expertise, the brothers began walking and swimming downstream from the spillway in swift-running water that ranged in depth from waist deep to over their heads until they found Garrett Vadino.

"We're just happy we were able to help," said Luke Newbold, who also serves as Columbiana County's Emergency Management Agency director.

Abraham said the kayakers wore life preservers but had removed them after reaching shore. Luke Newbold said the conditions were such that an Olympic swimmer would likely have drowned without a life preserver or other flotation device.

"You realize the best swimmers in the world ... can't fight against that type of water," he said.

The dam is scheduled to be removed sometime in the next several years as part of a joint project with the Ohio Department of Natural Resources and the former Nease Chemical plant, which is located upstream outside Salem.

Abraham said this is the first drowning in his 16 years with the department and others have told him the last drowning at the dam was in the 1960s.

"It is truly tragic," he said, "and it was Father's Day."

Abraham said these kinds of tragedies can have a profound effect on the police and fire personnel who respond to them. "It changes you," he said.

Luke Newbold agreed.

"I think when I leave here I'm going to go give my kids a good hug," he said.

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