

PUBLIC SAFETY

Jackie Watts died of accidental drowning, coroner says

Animal-lover was found dead amid Flat Rock River. Body of lost dog was found on bank.

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COLUMBUS, Ind. — The last time Jackie Watts was seen alive, she had just finished saving some animals and was likely giving her all in an attempt to save one more.



Witnesses say that Watts' final moments were spent along the Flatrock River in pursuit of Ringo, a 10-year-old poodle suffering from cataracts who was separated from his family just days earlier, according to police.

They say Watts was seen Friday afternoon chasing the small white dog one moment and that she was gone the next.

The next time anyone saw Watts or Ringo was when their bodies were discovered over the weekend by investigators from the Columbus Police Department.

Watts' autopsy, completed Monday, revealed she accidentally drowned, according to the Bartholomew County Coroner's Office.

Watts, a 33-year-old Indianapolis woman known for her selfless nature and love of animals, dedicated her life to helping creatures that could not help themselves.

"At a young age, Jackie developed a love for animals. To say that this was Jackie's passion would be an understatement," John Quick, a Watts family friend, said in a statement on their behalf. "Jackie volunteered with the Kentuckiana Boxer Rescue and Indy Claw Animal Rescue, where she was a member of the board of directors. She also fostered multiple dogs and rabbits. She cared deeply about the well-being of animals. If she believed she could help an animal in need, she was going to do so without hesitation. We know that Jackie gave her life for what she believed in.

"As her family, we are eternally grateful for the time that we had with Jackie. During this difficult time, we find solace in the stories of Jackie's impact on those that knew her, especially the memories that we have of Jackie as a wife, daughter and sister."

The words from Watts' family kicked off a Monday afternoon news conference that also saw Columbus Police Lt. Matt Harris provide a more detailed timeline of events leading up to Watts' death.

"She was the kind of person that when there was an animal sick and dying, she would take these animals in ... and provide them hospice care," Harris said. "So to hear someone making the statement that she was trying to help a lost dog and, sadly, it appears that she lost her life doing so ... it's a big loss."

According to Harris, the timeline began around 1:30 p.m. Friday when Watts dropped off a rabbit and two dogs at a home in Columbus. Shortly before 2 p.m., she was seen on a security camera leaving the home and heading toward Washington Street.

Around 2 p.m. Friday a witness saw a woman matching Watts' description chasing a small white dog in the area of 23rd and Washington streets, but that tip didn't come in until hours later, police said. Another witness told police that a woman who looked like Watts was seen chasing after a dog in a sweater near Flatrock River.

Between 2:15 p.m. and 3 p.m. Friday, an abandoned vehicle was reported on Riverside Drive. Police received another call about a suspicious white sedan around 4:51 p.m. Friday.

Friday's timeline ends with a report of a missing person shortly before 5 p.m. Watts' family grew concerned when she didn't make it back from dropping off the animals and contacted the authorities. Officials searched the area around the abandoned car until dark and resumed the search Saturday morning.

The ground search continued around 7:45 a.m. Saturday, Harris said. Roughly 15 minutes later, Watts was found on a sandbar in Flatrock River. There were no signs of a struggle and no indication that any foul play was involved in Watts' death.

Less than 10 minutes later, police received a tip about the missing dog.

On Sunday afternoon, after the waters of Flatrock Rock receded, police returned to the area to continue their investigation. They found Ringo's body shortly after 2 p.m. south of Noblitt Park on the river's east bank.

A follow-up conversation with the witness who saw a woman chasing a dog near the river affirmed the earlier report, police said. The witness said the woman was last seen running south toward the low-head dam.

Watts' family expressed gratitude in their statement read by Quick, stating that they continue to be overwhelmed by love and support from family, friends and the entire community.

"We are deeply moved that so many of you shared in the effort to help our Jackie. We would like to take this opportunity to tell you about the wonderful woman she was," said the family's statement. "In the days following Jacquelyn's passing, we have learned of many kind acts honoring her memory. It has lifted up our hearts to see that Jackie has touched so many lives."

In addition to volunteering at a number of organizations dedicated to the well-being of animals, Watts also served as a teaching assistant at Indianapolis Public Schools and as an events coordinator for Big Brothers Big Sisters of Indianapolis.

"And through her vocation as a Esthetician, Jackie saw beauty and value in everyone," said the statement. "She was an inspiration to those that knew her. Always placing others before herself, she lived and loved with great humility."

No foul play suspected in death of Jackie Watts

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