

Max Harlan jumped in water to rescue his 2 sons

By Bernie Delinski
and Lisa Singleton-Rickman
STAFF WRITERS

FLORENCE — The last thing Max Harlan's family remembers him doing was the same thing he had done for 20 years — demonstrate his love and dedication toward them.

Harlan, 46, has been missing in Cypress Creek since Sunday afternoon, when he went under while rescuing his two sons from drowning.

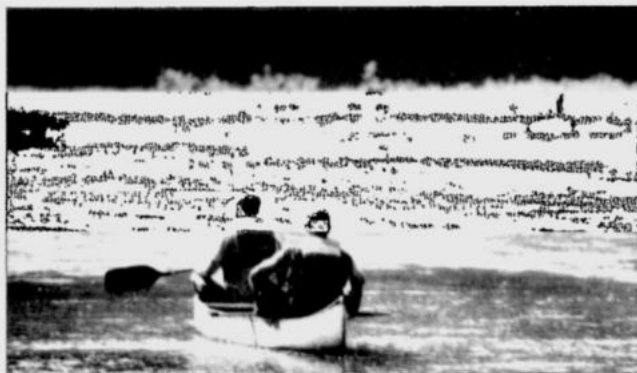
"He is a hero," said his sister-in-law, Sunny Cox. "He jumped in to save the boys."

Authorities have searched the creek since Sunday afternoon, but thus far have come up empty.

Cox was among eight people on a canoeing trip along Cypress Creek. The group included Harlan and his sons, Forrest, 13, and Trent, 14.

"The boys got out of the canoe to swim, and the current got them by the dam there," Cox said.

The area behind a city water-treatment plant includes a small waterfall. Lauderdale County Emergency Management Agency



MATT McLEATH/TimesDaily

Members of the search and rescue team paddle along Cypress Creek in a canoe Monday morning.

Director George Grabryan said people often canoe along the path, but the water has been especially swift lately, because of heavy rainfall.

Grabryan said the search will resume this morning, with cadaver dogs being brought in to assist.

CANOE continued on 4A

CANOE: Authorities still searching for man

Continued from 1A

The waterfall can pound a swimmer underneath, making it very difficult to get back up, Grabryan said.

Cox said that was happening to the boys. "The undertow was getting them, and their father jumped out of his canoe to pull the boys out. He got them out of the current, but he didn't come back up."

She said it was noisy because of the waterfall and fast-moving water, so the boys couldn't hear the family yelling for them to remain in the canoe.

"They canoe there all the time, but it was a little stronger than usual," Cox said. "They don't know

why they got out and swam. Kids will be kids.

"They are blaming themselves for what happened, but they shouldn't. It wasn't their fault. It was just one of those things. Nobody in the family blames them."

Forrest was taken to Eliza Coffee Memorial Hospital, because he was in shock and had swallowed a lot of water, Cox said. He was treated and released. Trent did not require medical attention, she said.

Cox said Harlan was as pure a family man as could ever be found. He also leaves two daughters, ages 16 and 11, and his wife, Dana. The couple celebrated their 20th anniversary July 5.

"A wonderful man was taken from us," she said. "Their lives were completely centered around those kids."

The feelings surrounding his loss extended also to his jobplace

the former Coffee High School building.

Harlan had worked there as custodian for five years. People who spoke of Harlan spoke highly of his strong work ethic and upstanding moral character.

Teachers and office workers were among the groups of people at the school visibly shaken by his reported death. Some were still trying to confirm details among their co-workers as they arrived at the school Monday.

The state of disbelief permeated the school, just one week away from opening.

Some were still holding out hope that he had actually not drowned but had somehow made it to shore awaiting someone to come to his aid.

The reality of the situation, however, was that Harlan's wife and four children were grieving the loss of their husband and father.

their husband and father.

So were those school employees who worked with him.

"I've been crying all day," said Gail Evans, an assistant in the Freshman Center office. "I can't think of many people I'd cry this much over. It's awful. He was just here working the other day, like always, with his cheerful spirit."

But there was something deeper that made Harlan beloved by those who knew him.

"I believe with all my soul that what he did, he did as if unto the Lord," Evans said. "He was cheerful and kind and an example for us all."

He was actively involved with his church, even driving an elderly group to and from church services and activities.

"He had come and opened the

school early Sunday morning for a crew of workers and was planning on coming back at 4 p.m. to lock it back up," said Florence schools superintendent Kendy Behrends.

"He was with the crews loading and unloading some big trucks at the school the other day and it crossed my mind how he'd just jumped in and worked on this project so willingly and always without complaint. He was just a great guy."

With the transformation nearly complete, those who knew him said Harlan was as pleased as anyone about the extensive work that's gone on at the school during the summer.

"He had a huge hand in it," said Gerald Johnson, the freshman center principal and a friend of Harlan's.

"He was a giving person — anyone or anytime — he was always there willing to help."

Johnson's assistant principal, Rod

Johnson's assistant principal, Rod Sheppard, said Harlan was more than a great employee with an outstanding work ethic. He said he was a role model for the students.

"I just saw him (Sunday) getting into his church van and I just thought, 'what a great man,'" Sheppard said.

"I just wish I'd taken the time to tell him how I felt and what a great asset he was to those kids, to the whole building. But he knew he was loved."

Two of Harlan's four children will attend Florence Middle School/Freshman Center this year.

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