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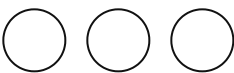
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2 Walnut Creek teens drowned in treacherous stream

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School children from Murwood Elementary school in Walnut Creek stop to read signs at a makeshift memorial for Matthew Miller and Gavin Russell. Feb. 23, 2011. The two local boys' high school students drowned

For Matthew Miller and Gavin Powell Tuesday Feb 22, 2011. The two Las Lomas high school students drowned while trying to navigate the rain-swollen creek in a two-person inflatable raft this past weekend.

Lance Iversen/The Chronicle

A brash attempt by two urban teens to raft an urban stream probably turned quickly into a harrowing plunge through a concrete chute, with 20-foot vertical walls on both sides, churning with rainwater, branches, rocks and trash.

The channel where Matthew Miller, 16, and Gavin Powell, 17, of Walnut Creek drowned Saturday may have only been a few feet deep, but its appearance was deceiving. And, officials say, channels like this one can be found all over the Bay Area.

"It looks totally innocent," said Mitch Avalon, deputy director of the Public Works Department of Contra Costa County. "But when it's full (of water) you can't get out once you're in it."

About 100 feet from where the boys entered the water with their two-person inflatable raft was a chute with 20-foot-high walls and no way out. The frigid waters moved swiftly and they were soon pulled underground into a three-quarter-mile-long tunnel beneath downtown Walnut Creek. A few miles downstream, they tumbled two stories into a deep pool designed to slow raging storm runoff.

The boys' bodies were recovered Sunday in Concord, several miles downstream of the pool. Their deflated raft was found upstream, in Walnut Creek, at the waterfall.

Common urban feature

Flood control channels - some visible, some not - are common in cities where a central river or stream has the potential to overrun its banks. But these mundane canals are extremely treacherous when swollen with heavy rains, experts say,

because they function to funnel water as quickly as possible from urban areas into larger bodies of water.

The San Ramon bypass the teens tried to navigate was built in the late 1980s to channel storm water from Walnut Creek's parking lots, streets and sidewalks. Downstream, the bypass connects with the namesake Walnut Creek waterway before emptying into Suisun Bay to the north.

During parched summer months, the channel flow shrivels to a trickle. But last week's soaking storms produced a coursing ribbon of water – a vision that proved too enticing for two teens described as funny, smart, outgoing and adventurous.

Amid Saturday's soggy weather, the two juniors from Las Lomas High School donned helmets and launched their blue-and-yellow raft on Sans Crainte Creek in a residential area near Murwood Elementary School and Vanderslice Avenue, authorities said. They did not wear life vests.

Sans Crainte Creek and other upstream brooks that cut through private land are protected only by trees, brush, backyards, open spaces and roads. In some spots, dirt paths wind down to the water.

Just downstream, however, the bracken-covered banks give way to the sheer cement walls of the San Ramon bypass. Beyond the walls and up on the banks, the channel is surrounded by fences adorned with "No Trespassing" signs.

Report next week

On Tuesday, officials with the Contra Costa County Flood Control and Water Conservation District, which owns and manages the San Ramon bypass, examined the site where Matthew and Gavin embarked to evaluate whether additional fencing or warnings are necessary or feasible – particularly on private property,

Avalon said. They are expecting to present a report to the county Board of Supervisors next week.

At least one of the teenagers' classmates said the current warnings and barriers aren't enough.

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"The signs say 'No trespassing,' but they should probably communicate the danger ... that there are serious consequences, that people have died," said William Hansel, a Las Lomas senior who ran on the cross-country team with Miller.

Investigators with the Contra Costa Sheriff's Department and Walnut Creek Police Department are uncertain how far the boys traveled aboard their raft. But the deflated raft was found several miles to the north at the 20-foot man-made

waterfall near Bancroft Road and Bentley Street at 8:30 a.m. Sunday.

The bodies of Matthew and Gavin were recovered in the waterway near Buchanan Field in Concord. They were reported missing by their families shortly after midnight Sunday after friends said they missed a prearranged pickup appointment Saturday evening.

The tragedy, which many classmates marked Tuesday by wearing bright yellow - Matthew and Gavin often wore yellow bike gear - and leaving flowers and cards at spots along the creek, isn't the first for that stretch of waterway.

In April, a 75-year-old Walnut Creek woman was pulled from the channel in a dramatic helicopter rescue after the car driven by her son crashed through two fences and landed upside down in the rushing water. Janet Hogan survived; but her son, 40-year-old Timothy Hogan, and husband, 79-year-old James Hogan, died.

Other teen drownings

Three other teens who ventured into the creek drowned in two separate instances in the early 1990s and early 1970s, Avalon said.

Granted, many more children and adults may have braved the creeks waters over the years and come away unscathed - they simply haven't come to the attention of authorities, said sheriff's Lt. Eric Navarro, who announced the finding of the boys' bodies Sunday.

"All of us have done things in our lives that you look back on and think, I got away with one," Navarro said.

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