

Grand Rapids

Family of Grand Rapids man, 24, who drowned in Grand River says he loved being outdoors

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Stewart Black

Courtesy Photo

Benjamin

GRAND RAPIDS — Family of a [man who drowned in the frigid waters of the Grand River](#) on Sunday morning described him as an outgoing man who died in the great outdoors doing what he loved.

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Anything to do with the outside — you name it. He was in love with it, said Sarah Williams, mother of Benjamin Stewart Black, 24, of Kentwood, who was knocked unconscious when the boat in which he was fishing capsized Sunday around 11 a.m.

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Black floated downriver face down after he and a friend flipped the 12-foot aluminum boat, which got swamped by the coffer dam undercurrent just north of Bridge Street NW, next to the Bridgewater Place condominiums.

Grand Rapids Fire Department rescuers fished Black out of the water at Fulton Street with a harness and assistance from a private fishing boat. He was in the water for about five to 10 minutes.

Fire officials said he was unresponsive with no vital signs and received CPR before being sped to St. Mary's Health Care, where he was pronounced dead.

There was initial hope that the icy waters kept his core temperature low enough to survive the exposure, but "he was gone already," said Williams.

"He was a very, very outgoing person who always cared about others," she said. "He was a good son."

The boat's other occupant, Travis Menzel, 24, of Grand Rapids, clung to the stern after going in the water and could be heard telling friends watching nervously from the bridge above that he was losing feeling in his legs.

River team rescuers had to cut a pair of waders off Menzel when they got tangled up in a small motor on the back of the boat, which was anchored to the bottom and had to be towed from the river later that afternoon.

Menzel was taken to Spectrum Health Butterworth Hospital, where he was treated and

Menzel was taken to Spectrum Health Butterworth Hospital, where he was treated and released.

Friends Josh Vanderklok, 20, of Lowell and Sedrick Nienhuis, 22, of Belding, said Menzel and Black were trying to move the boat closer to the eastern shore by the Post Office when the current pulled them sideways into the coffer dam, causing water to come over the side.

The pair had been fishing for steelhead -- popular with anglers on the river -- earlier from shore.

"They both went out," Josh Vanderklok, 20, of Lowell. "Travis was able to hang onto the boat, but it floated away from Ben."

The downtown area of the Grand River is marked by several small coffer dams, a type of low-head waterfall that some have dubbed "drowning machines" because they can trap boaters and waders and push them under water.

Nienhuis and Vanderklok said they chose to fish from the bridge rather than the water because of the height of the river, which was swollen with snow melt.

Fire Battalion Chief Frank Verburg said the coffer-dams have a strong undercurrent several feet in front of them, which can easily capsize a boat if it's pulled into the wash alongside.

He said boaters need to follow safety precautions like using life vests when on the icy river — which he said neither man was using — and be aware of the current.

"Right now, with the melting and the snow, it's pretty swift," he said.

Williams said funeral arrangements are pending for Black, who was an organ donor.

He is survived by his parents, Sarah and Stewart Williams and two sisters, Amanda Demull and Melissa Williams.

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