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NEWS

Bondsville man, despondent over death of brother, drowns in Swift River

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By **John Appleton**


 upper-bondsville-dam.jpg

Photo courtesy the **Belchertown Land Trust**

Upper Bondsville Dam.

PALMER – A man who drowned in the Swift River after going off the Upper Bondsville Dam Monday night was identified by police as James Norman, a 25-year-old Bondsville resident who they said was reported being despondent over the recent death of his brother.

 norman, james bcrop.jpg James Norman

Police Chief Robert P. Frydryk said Norman had walked out on the dam after leaving a vigil for his

17-year-old brother, Eric Norman, who died early Saturday morning

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when his dirt bike hit a telephone pole.

“We know he was despondent,” Frydryk said. “He either jumped or was swept away. We can only speculate as to his intentions when he walked out on the dam.”

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The Norman brothers lived at 30 Crawford St. in the Bondsville section of Palmer.

Rescue workers went to the river after police received a telephone report at 9:30 Monday night saying someone was seen going off the dam into the swirling water below.

Rescue crews from Palmer, Bondsville, Three Rivers and Belchertown Fire Departments and town and state police set up a search under the direction of Bondsville Fire Chief Scott D. Gustafson.

Lights were set up along the Belchertown and Palmer banks of the river, but it was nearly two hours before the body was spotted by state police using high intensity light from a helicopter.

At that point the crews stretched safety ropes across the river and a dive team from Wilbraham went in to recover the body in about eight feet of water, roughly 15 feet from the Belchertown shore, more than one-third of a mile downstream from the dam.

“When you put people in the water you have to be careful,” Frydryk said. “The water was cold and was flowing at about 11 knots. We had a lot of brave personnel, between 75 and 100. Everybody who was there had a job to do.”



A crowd of people, some of whom had been at the vigil in Bondsville Grammar Park, gathered on the Depot Street Bridge over the Swift River and watched parts of the search operation.

Frydryk said police heard second-hand reports when they first arrived that it was James Norman who went off the dam into the water, but it took about an hour to get in touch with the friend of Norman's who reported seeing him scale a six-foot fence and then walk out onto the dam.

The dive team brought the body out at about 1:20 a.m. Tuesday.

Frydryk said the Hampden County Medical Examiner's office will conduct an autopsy, which will provide definitive identification and cause of death.

In June 2006, a 15-year-old boy drowned after trying to walk across the dam, and there have been close calls there as well.

The

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, which acquired the dam a few years ago as part of its efforts to improve the land on both sides of the river, cleared brush and put up fencing to block access.

Frydryk, who has issued warnings about the dam and the turbulent water below, said the land trust “did everything they could to prevent access.”

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