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Search yields no results for women who plunged over Boshers's Dam

KATHERINE LUTGE and MARK BOWES Richmond Times-Dispatch

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Authorities search the James River Tuesday after two women went over Boshers's Dam in Richmond.

Daniel Sangjib Min/TIMES-DISPATCH

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Hope faded Tuesday **that two missing women would be found alive after they plunged over Boshers's Dam on paddle boards with 10 companions** on Memorial Day. Crews came up empty after an all-day search of the James River using

drones, helicopters, planes and a variety of boats.

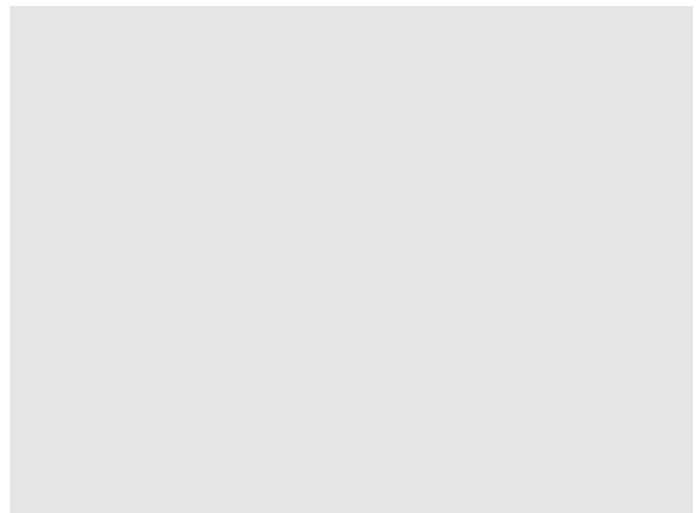
Area first-responders from Richmond and Henrico and Chesterfield counties joined Tuesday to continue the search for Lauren E. Winstead, 23, of Henrico County, and Sarah E. Erway, 28, who went missing about 3:15 p.m. Monday at the dam, which interrupts the natural flow of the river and drops 12 feet. Winstead and Erway were among a group of 12 on a float trip using paddle boards and rafts that apparently were tied together.

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After the party went over the dam, Richmond Fire Rescue crews, with assistance from civilian kayakers, were able to rescue and account for 10 of the people. Nine were taken to a reunification center at Richmond Fire Station No. 25 at 8800 W. Huguenot Road to meet with family members. One got to safety and self-transported to the hospital, Richmond fire officials said.

The group had launched Monday from Watkins Landing in Powhatan County and tried reaching shore at Robious Landing in Chesterfield, but the current was too strong and they continued drifting down stream, authorities said.



The Rev. Vander Warner and his wife Winnie Warner said they have known Erway since she was a child and know her mother well. They came Tuesday to pray by the river.

First responders return to Huguenot Flatwater for a midday break after searching the James River all morning for two women who went missing yesterday. They were searching between the Huguenot Bridge and Boshers Dam on Tuesday.

ALEXA WELCH EDLUND, TIMES-DISPATCH

“She is a precious young lady,” Winnie Warner said. “So sweet and always there for her friends, kind, high spirited, gracious, there aren’t many people like Sarah.”

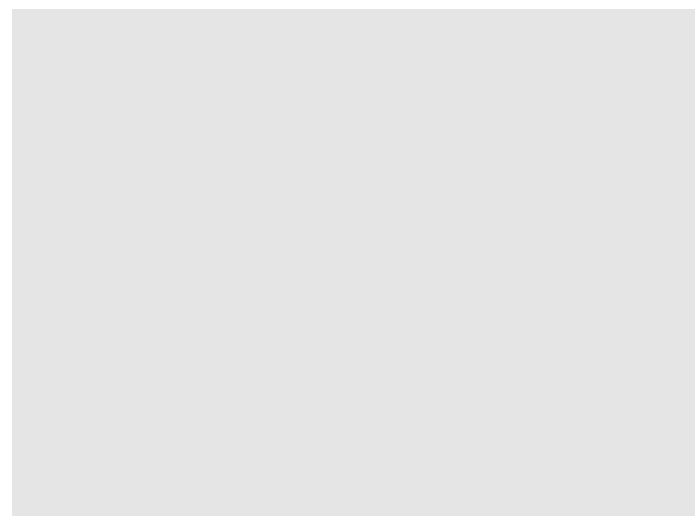
‘It just hits you so hard’

The Warners said they understand what that tragedy feels like. Vander Warner lost two daughters from a previous relationship and Winnie Warner lost a son at age 45 from a previous relationship as well.

“And the tragedy of this is how it happened, and what they were doing,” Pastor Warner said. “I know how it feels to have a loved one die, so we were letting them know we feel this with you.”

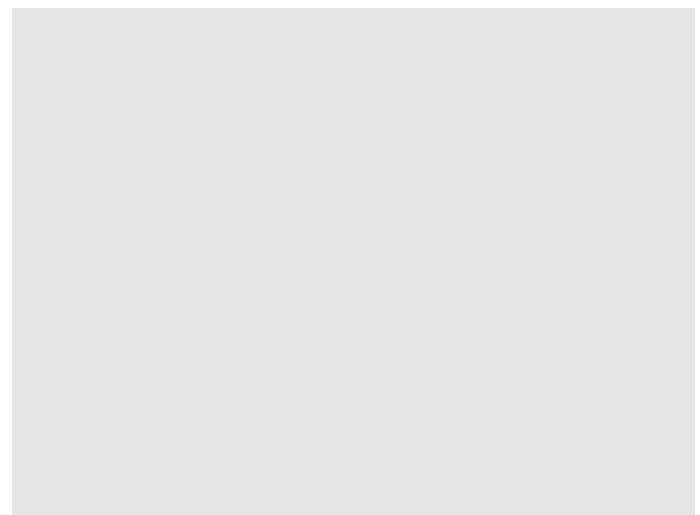
“The mother is broken right now,” Winnie Warner said. “We just held her and loved her. It’s love that will get her through this.”

The Warner led a group in prayer at while first responders continued to search the water. “Tragedy is



Sarah E. Erway, 28, of Chesterfield County was among a group of 12 floaters who plunged over Boshers’ Dam on Memorial Day.

Henrico Division of Police



Winstead

unspeakable; it just hits you so hard,”

Henrico Division of Police

Pastor Warner said.

“For Sarah, wherever she is, we know the boards are revolving on the dam,” Winnie Warner said. “She was on a board with just a paddle. They were all tied together, up river, and Sarah was the one to say, ‘Get back, get away.’ ”

First responders made Huguenot Flatwater, 8600 Southampton Road, their base for the search mission. Crews in fire rescue boats were solemn as they continued to look for the women between Boshers’ Dam and the Powhite.

“It is important to remind our community the James River is at dangerous levels and anyone entering should use extreme caution and use a life jacket,” Henrico police Lt. Matt Pecka said.

“There are community members that want to help, but the rivers are at such dangerous levels that we would caution anyone to go in,” Pecka added. Even trained professionals need to take certain precautions. “So we are encouraging people who have property along the river to be on the look out. But we would always encourage anyone to use extreme caution.”

Latest in series of incidents

The National Weather Service on Monday recorded the water levels at over 9 feet by 3 p.m., which is considered to be “action stage,” or the level in which mitigation measures are needed to prepare for significant activity on the water.

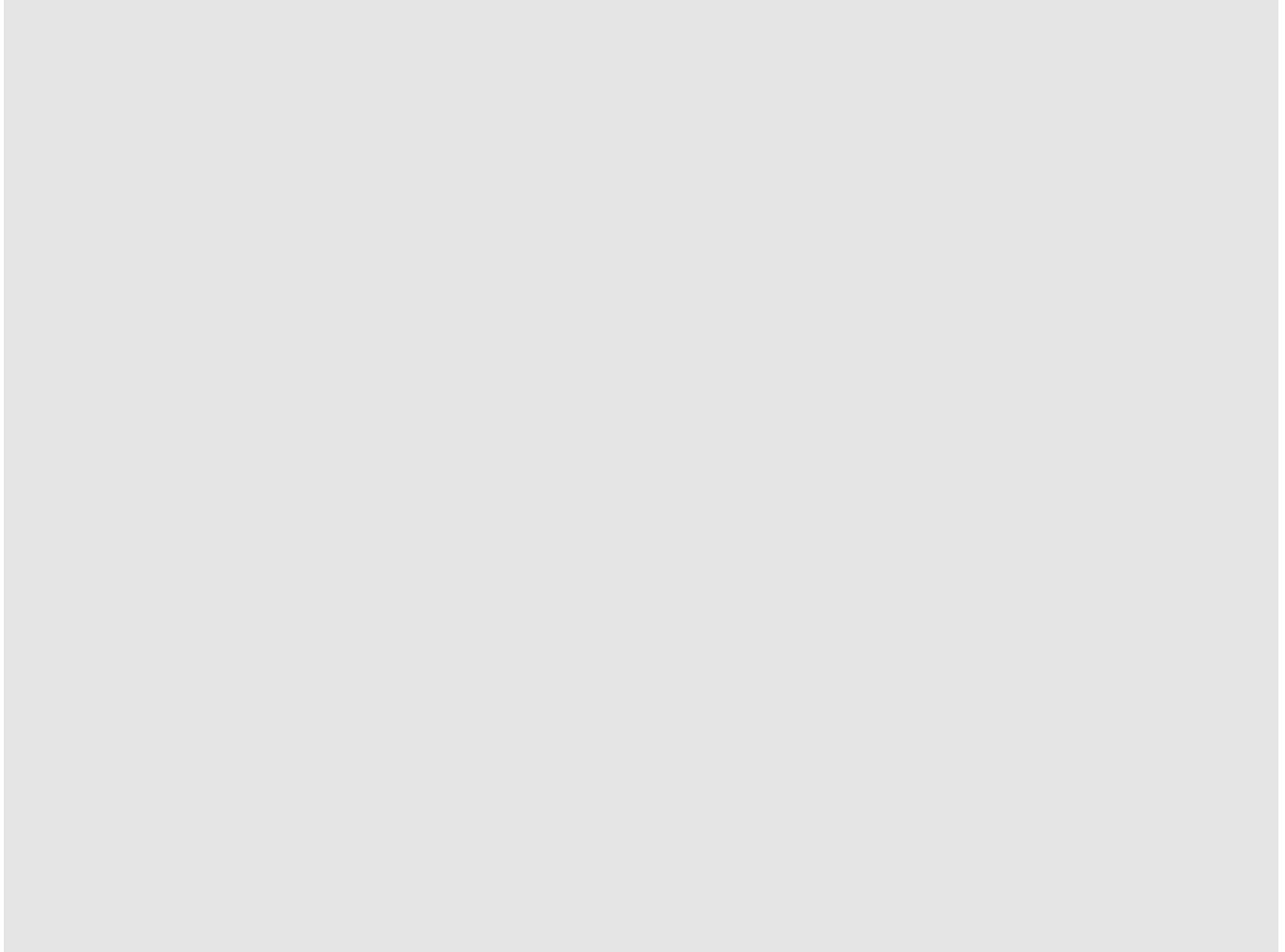
Richmond restaurant Perch has closed; owner cites pandemic and economy downturn

Water levels above 6 feet is deemed “too high” for average paddlers due to powerful rapids.

Boshers’ Dam is a historic low-head type dam that spans the James River just west of Richmond. Such dams, sometimes referred to as “drowning machines,” can present a safety hazard to boaters because of their capacity to produce dangerous recirculating

currents, large hydraulic forces, and other hazardous conditions sufficient to swamp vessels and trap and drown victims immediately.

Bosher's Dam has been the scene of a number of incidents — some fatal — over the years.



Authorities work on searching two missing women at Boshers Dam in Richmond, Va., on Tuesday, May 31, 2022.

Daniel Sangjib Min/TIMES-DISPATCH

In July 1988, Lisa E. Cavanaugh, 20, of Richmond, drowned after an 18-foot boat in which she was riding with three other persons went over Bosher's Dam. Cavanaugh was sitting in the bow of the boat and she fell on a rock, and then into the water where she drowned, according to news accounts.

In February 1984, Robert M. Green, 15, of Chesterfield, was swept away in the icy, swollen current of the James River after, according to two of his friends, he jumped into the water from Boshers' Dam "just to get wet." More than two months passed before his body was recovered in April of that year about two miles downstream. The boy drowned.

In another incident, Janet Heath, 25, was injured in June 1987 when a boat in which she was a passenger went over the dam. The boat was pulling a water skier. The boat was removed later that same day from the rocks where it was wedged below the dam.