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# Beautiful or fatal? Picturesque dams hide a deadly legacy

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## Key Points

Two men, Alec Campbell and Jonathan Gentile, both 38-year-old fathers and husbands, drowned in separate incidents involving dams in Bucks County, Pennsylvania.

Approximately 100 deaths in Pennsylvania and more than 600 nationwide are attributed to low-head dams, according to research.

Jim Gentile, Jonathan's father, emphasizes the need for increased signage and public awareness about the dangers of low-head dams.

It was the day after the anniversary of his son's death when Jim Gentile heard a park ranger had gone missing near a low-head dam in Tyler State Park in Pennsylvania over Memorial Day Weekend.

Two days later, when the body of Alec Campbell had been recovered – his death a result of his kayak capsizing in fast-moving water near [the Weir Dam](#) on the Neshaminy Creek in Bucks County – Gentile couldn't help but relive his own family's tragic loss.

[His son, Jonathan](#) David Gentile, who had been in town visiting from the Pittsburgh suburb of Mount Lebanon, drowned in the unforgiving currents of the nearby New Hope wing dam in 2022.

There were too many parallels to ignore.

The two men were both 38 years old when they died. Each one, a husband and a father.

Campbell and Jonathan were both known for their involvement in their communities – Campbell as a passionate educator who enjoyed connecting with visitors and students throughout his time as a park ranger, and Jonathan as a vibrant teacher, mentor and coach.

Both deaths, Jim said, were preventable.

“My son died, somebody else’s son has died. In three years, nothing has been done,” said Jim, a nurse who has since devoted much of his time advocating for the remediation and removal of low-head dams.

## **The dangers of New Hope Dam**

Looking downstream toward the New Hope Dam on a recent Monday afternoon, the Delaware River gave off an air of tranquility, its glassy surface reflecting the tree-lined hills and clear blue sky above before cascading off the V-shaped stone structure below.

The conditions weren't much different from the day Jim and Jonathan set out on their kayaks three years earlier.

“When approaching it, it looked just like the edge of an infinity pool. The water flowing over it looked so peaceful and calm,” Jim recalled.

The scene gave little indication of the dangers that waited for them on the other side.

Trailing a few yards behind, Jim watched Jonathan confidently paddle over the edge of the dam before falling just out of his line of sight for what should’ve just been a moment until he could catch up with his son.

But by the time he guided his boat over the same drop off, a mere 30 seconds later, Jonathan had completely vanished.

“I swam under the waterfalls, I saw his kayak lodged up under there, and all I kept thinking is, 'He’s under the water,'” Jim said.

He desperately screamed his son’s name over and over as he searched the river, knowing any chance of survival dwindled with each passing second. He spotted a lifejacket breaking the surface of the water several minutes later, and quickly made his way over and to find his unconscious son floating in it.

In the moments that followed, Jim did all he could in an attempt to save Jonathan’s life, fighting against a strong current that threatened to rip his son away as he attempted to rescue him out of the water and onto the precarious rocky shore.

"I pulled him up and held him tight with his back on my chest," Jim said. "He started to turn purple. And I tried to blow air into his lungs, but I can't because there's too much water, and I tried to do CPR and couldn't because we were stuck on the rocks."

"I couldn't save him."

Thanks to a 911 call from one of the bystanders watching from a nearby condominium balcony, members of a marine rescue crew eventually made their way to the two men. They brought Jonathan to a flatter surface further down shore, where they could properly administer CPR and employ the use of an AED and other emergency medical interventions to get his heart beating again.

Jonathan survived two days in the hospital, hooked up to a ventilator, giving his family a chance to donate his organs and say their final goodbyes.

## Low-head dams have killed more than 600 people

In the years that followed, Jim has turned his grief into action. He's advocated for adequate signage explicitly warning people of the dangers, and ultimately, the complete elimination of the more than [13,000 low-head dams](#) that remain in the United States.

The one in New Hope is considered a wing dam, but he believes the structure should be reclassified as a low-head dam, given its size and shape, which creates the dangerous underwater hydraulic effect that his son had fallen victim to.

Low-head dams typically span the entire width of the waterway, according to the [American Society of Civil Engineers](#). They're usually between 1- to 15-feet in height, allowing water to flow over their tops, resulting in a powerful "washing machine effect" that essentially traps people under water with little chance of escaping.

"The hydraulics of these things are generally not known by the public," Mike Parker, spokesman for the [Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission](#), told the Bucks County Courier Times, part of the USA TODAY Network. "There's a low-head dam in the Susquehanna (River) in Harrisburg that's killed around 30 people over the last few decades."

In Pennsylvania alone, more than 100 deaths have occurred at three dozen dams across the commonwealth, according to [a study conducted by a team of researchers at Brigham Young University](#).

According to the report, the [database that was compiled as a part of the project](#) continues to be updated. While based on an extensive search of public records, it's not all-inclusive.

“As long as dangerous low-head dams exist, there will be more tragic cases and the database is destined to grow,” the report concluded, asking lawmakers and engineers to use the information to determine remediation measures to improve public safety.

There are more than 600 names listed in the database. Campbell and Jonathan are among them.

As difficult as it is to relive the events of that day, Jim is determined to keep telling his son's story. He carries the hope that something will change on the local, state and federal levels to prevent low-head dams from claiming more lives.

“It's hard coming here,” he said, standing just yards away from the dam that took his firstborn.

“But if it saves someone's son, someone's father, someone's husband, then I don't care how hard it is. ... These are preventable deaths, and they are turning a blind eye to public safety. It's irresponsible, and it's reckless. But nothing is being done.”

*Michele Haddon and JD Mullane report for the Bucks County Courier Times.*

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