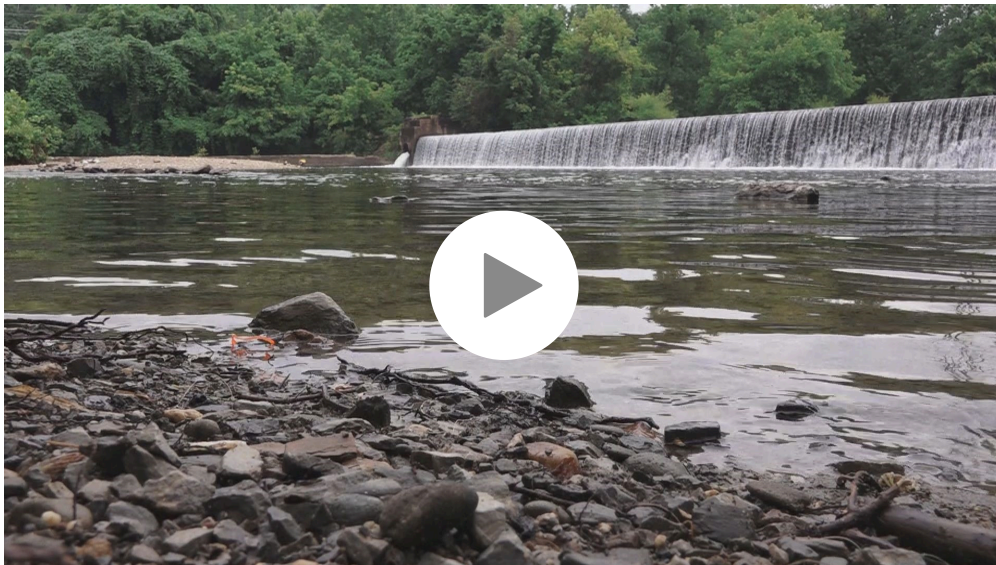


BREAKING NEWS LIVE COVERAGE: 5 soldiers shot on base at Fort Stewart in Georgia, officials confirm

LOCAL NEWS

Small dams pose deadly hidden danger; mothers want warning signs

The families of drowning victims at Peery's Mill Dam on the Little River want additional warning signs to alert swimmers of the danger of low-head dams.



Author: Jim Matheny

Published: 8:39 PM EDT June 5, 2019

Updated: 9:59 PM EDT June 5, 2019



WALLAND, Tenn. — The mother of a 13-year-old girl who drowned at Peery's Mill Dam on the Little River near Walland wants changes to alert visitors of a deadly hidden danger.

Renee Ritchie took her daughter, Alexis Shirley, swimming at the popular spot May 29. The rising 8th-grader at Hardin Valley Middle School was not doing anything risky when she disappeared beneath the water.

"She was a bright and bubbly little girl. Very witty, very cautious, and not a daredevil. She had not gone over near the dam or on top of the dam. She was not jumping off rocks or any of that,"

said Ritchie. "She was just dog-paddling, playing around, and swimming in water that may have been up to her chest. She was swimming toward the rock beach in the middle of the river away from the dam. We had been playing fetch with the dog. Then she was just gone. Nobody saw a thing. Nothing."



Credit: WBIR

Renee Ritchie holds a stuffed animal that belonged to her daughter Alexis Shirley. The 13-year-old girl drowned in the water below Peery's Mill Dam near Walland.

Ritchie said her boyfriend climbed on top of the dam to get a better look down the shoreline. He looked in the water and noticed "a discolored spot," jumped in, and pulled the girl from the bottom.

"He pulled her out and it was only a couple of steps to right there where her flowers are (on the rocky island) where her flowers are. Everybody came together and started to help," said Ritchie.

Isaac Rymar of Knoxville was at the dam when Alexis Shirley was pulled from the water. He yelled for someone to call 911 and then helped administer CPR until paramedics arrived.



Credit: WBIR

Alexis Shirley, 13, drowned in the Little River at Peery's Mill Dam near Walland on May 30, 2019. Photo provided by mother Renee Ritchie.

"I have been coming here to Peery's Mill Dam for 20 years. The water that day was really low. It was extremely calm that day, I thought. There's something going on under there [the water] that we just can't see," said Rymar. "It's a danger and there's not a single sign here that states there's a danger, other than the portage for kayaks and boats."

The dam at Peery's Mill is known as a low-head dam. The invisible danger at low-head dams is an underwater vortex that traps and spins objects beneath the water and against the dam. Many dam safety experts refer to low-head dams "drowning machines."

There is a large warning sign just upstream from the dam warning boaters of a drop. There are no signs warning swimmers of the dangerous currents associated with low-head dams.



Credit: WBIR

TWRA posts access rules at the boat ramp on Little River at Peery's Mill Dam. There are no signs warning swimmers of dangerous low-head dam currents.

"This is not a tall dam. It does not look like it would be dangerous. There should absolutely be some kind of signage to warn people. I think there has to be a wake-up call for the whole community because this has happened before," said Rymar.

Many people have drowned at Peery's Mill Dam and other low-head dams in East Tennessee.

- August 1996: Three people drowned at low-head dams on the Little River. Kyle David Tyree of Maryville drowned when his kayak was swallowed by the circulating currents at the low-head dam in Rockford. Ernest Koella, a manager at the plant beside the dam, died trying to save Tyree. The next day, a third man drowned at Peery's Mill Dam.
- June 2009: Krista Spangler died at Peery's Mill Dam after diving into water that was too shallow.
- July 2013: Bobby William Halcomb, 25, jumped off the dam and was trapped underwater by the current.
- May 2017: Anna Last of Cocke County died at a low-head dam on the Nolichucky River in Hamblen County. Last died while saving two of her children who were caught in the current.
- May 2018: Ty Berry of Walland, age 33, drowned at Peery's Mill Dam. A boy saw him jump in the water and called 911 when he did not resurface.

Aug. 1996

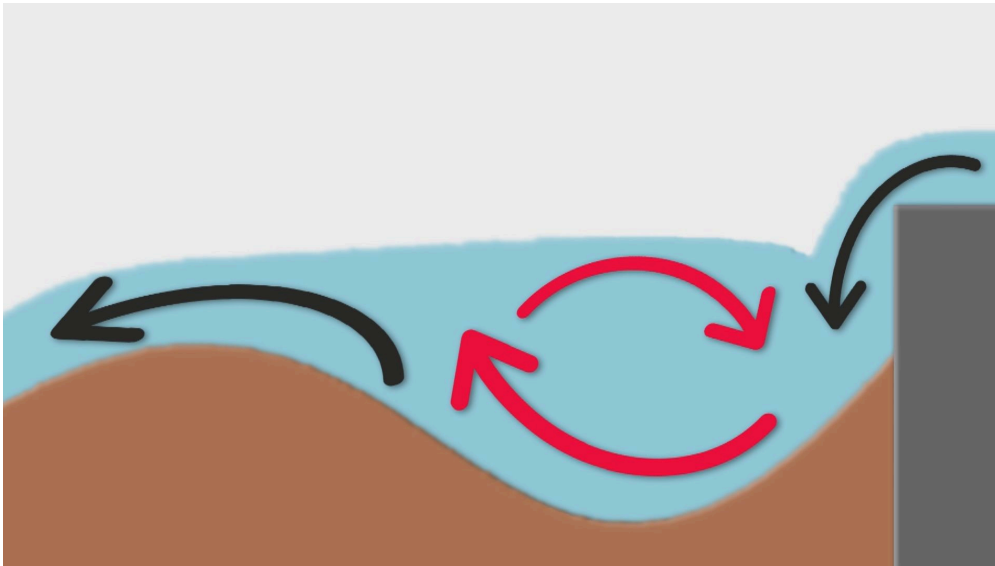


Credit: WBIR

A drowning victim's kayak is trapped with other debris by the circulating current at the low-head dam at Rockford in August 1996.

Ty Berry's mother, Lori Keesey, contacted Renee Ritchie when she heard about the latest death.

"My heart aches for her because I know what she is going through losing a child. And it happened exactly one year after my son, Ty, died at the same location. It is something you cannot imagine," said Keesey. "Ty had been swimming here a million times. But with these dams, if you go into the wrong place, you really don't stand a chance. I do not think people understand this. I don't think my son understood it."



Credit: WBIR

Graphic showing the deadly circulating currents associated with low-head dams that trap swimmers. Dam safety experts call low-head dams "drowning machines."

Keesey said low-head dams should have the same warning signs she has seen at waterfalls that create a similar deadly vortex that traps swimmers.

"At the Sinks [in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park], there's a big sign posted warning swimmers that this is dangerous. I think that would go a long way. There absolutely should be more signs and people absolutely need to be more aware," said Keesey.

"There are enough people who've lost their lives here. I didn't sleep for about three days. Every time I blinked my eyes, I saw her [Alexis Shirley] and I was right back at the moment when I was trying to save her," said Rymar. "I believe this is the last day I'll probably come here [Peery's Mill Dam] ever again."

Ritchie held a funeral for Alexis on Monday. She buried her daughter Tuesday. She was back at the spot where her daughter died on Wednesday to prevent others from suffering the same fate as her daughter.



Credit: WBIR

Flowers are placed on the rocky mid-stream island where Alexis Shirley, 13, was pulled from the water after drowning below Peery's Mill Dam.

"Something needs to be posted right when you walk in the water. Something that gets your attention and explains what kind of current the low-head dam has," said Ritchie. "I understand there is going to be danger everywhere and you can't bubble-wrap the world. But when there is a consistent problem of people getting trapped, something needs to change. Something so nobody else has to go through this."

Ritchie said she would also like experts to explore structural changes beneath the dam to reduce the dangerous currents.

The public boat access at Peery's Mill Dam is provided by Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA) and TVA.

WBIR 10News contacted TWRA about this story. Spokesperson Matt Cameron said TWRA manages the boat ramp access, but does not regulate swimming in the Little River. Even so, he said TWRA will examine the issue and consider posting additional warning signs for swimmers.



Credit: WBIR

The family of Bobby William Halcomb, 25, posted a sign in his memory at Peery's Mill Dam. Halcomb drowned at the low-head dam in 2013.

LOADING NEXT ARTICLE...