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SAVING LIVES ONE JACKET AT A TIME

Drowning death leads to non-profit donating 175 life jackets to children

BY SHEILA HARRIS

sheilaharrisads@gmail.com

Colleen Mahurin, office administrator at Green Mountain Realty in Shell Knob, along with other residents in the community, was devastated last May by the drowning death of 14-year-old Ean Hueback.

Hueback jumped into the lake from a dock, and due to strong winds and waves, was unable to swim out.

"I knew his mother — I went to school with her — so I wanted to do something to help after the tragedy," Mahurin said.

With the help of her sister, Cassity Flygare, of Shell Knob, and the crew at Green Mountain Realty, including Roger Pinnell and Stacey Larson, Mahurin started a fundraising drive, beginning with a community pancake breakfast last summer. Their hope was to prevent the drowning death of another child by providing life-jackets to those who didn't have one, and encouraging

children to wear a life-jacket.

"The fundraising breakfast went over really well," Mahurin said. "We raised over \$1,000, plus people donated new and gently-used life-jackets."

Fifty new life jackets were donated by Bass Pro Shops, where several of Mahurin and Flygare's family members work.

After the benefit, Mahurin set about establishing a non-profit group, Swim Safe Shell Knob, and began visiting area businesses to solicit sponsorship commitments.

"Swim Safe was officially authorized as a non-profit organization just as we completed our sponsorship drive," she said.

Mahurin said the group's goal was to distribute a new life jacket to every student in the Shell Knob School before the end of the school year.

With sponsorship funds, which

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6-7



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GROUP ADVOCATES FOR SAFER WATERS IN SHELL KNOB

Deep dive into drowning statistics reveals greater need in rural areas

BY SHEILA HARRIS

sheilaharrisads@gmail.com

Molly Lancaster Rodriguez returned to memories of her childhood two years ago when she and her husband, Elder Rodriguez, left California and moved to Shell Knob, where she'd spent many happy hours on the lake with her grandfather, Walter Coshow, as a child.

Like others in the community, Rodriguez was shocked by the tragic drowning death of 14-year-old Ean Hueback last year. The event brought residents together in grief, but also brought the awareness that perhaps more could be done in the community to prevent drowning deaths.

While Colleen Mahurin initiated a life-jacket drive and formed the non-profit organization, Swim Safe Shell Knob, Molly Rodriguez set about creating a different type of safety tool that can be used in Shell Knob.

As the assistant professor of Public Health and director of the Rural Equity and Access for Community Health (REACH) Lab at Missouri State University (MSU), Rodriguez wanted to use her background in rural healthcare to serve her own community. When a colleague told her about the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative — an organization that provides operational support for the needs of local communities, with an emphasis on science and education — Rodriguez applied for a small grant, and her application was approved.

With the grant funds, Rodriguez



A Safe Waters Initiative Workshop was held on May 30. From left: Dr. Molly Lancaster Rodriguez, Rev. Bill Kenagy, Larry Mankins, Skylar Travis, Dianne Mason, Jan Weiberg and Cheryn Hargrave. Contributed photo

formed Safe Waters Initiative, a university-sponsored initiative to promote water safety. Since then, she's been teaching eight of her interested neighbors how to access and interpret public data, then harvest and package it for informational and educational purposes.

"For example, I taught them how to access information about drowning deaths on the Missouri State Highway Patrol's (MSHP) website," Rodriguez said.

After researching six years of data, the group came up with some startling results.

"Statewide, drowning deaths appear to be going down," Rodriguez said. "But,

when you look closer, drowning deaths in rural areas are actually going up."

According to an info-graphic produced with the data compiled by the group, 87.6% of fatal drownings reported by MSHP from 2020 to 2025 occurred in rural counties, compared to 30% of Missouri's population as a whole.

In Missouri, 30% of Missouri residents live in rural areas (compared to 20% nationwide), the infographic states, but National Water Safety Plans primarily focus on urban settings and pools, rather than open sources of water such as lakes and rivers.

In other words, public education geared toward drowning prevention is scarce in rural communities where it's most needed.

Rodriguez and her neighbors hope to help alleviate that scarcity in Shell Knob.

"Based on the statistics, we also learned that the number of men who drown is much higher than the number of women," Rodriguez said. "So, we plan to create appropriate messaging for that high-risk group: the fathers and the boat-captains in charge of families and crews.

"Even though we all know that men don't like to be lectured to," she added with a laugh.

One focus of the Safe Waters Initiative has been conducting a local survey, then compiling the data, regarding swimming

lessons within the Shell Knob community. Support for the idea is strong.

A little over 60% of survey respondents said their household would benefit from swimming lessons, the Safe Waters community snapshot shows.

Over 70% cited the lack of local providers as the largest barriers to swimming lessons.

In a nod to a possible way forward, an overwhelming majority, over 89% of respondents, stated they "would support free or low-cost swimming lessons for the community, through volunteering, donating or enrolling."

In addition to drowning statistics, near-drownings were a category worthy of scrutiny by the Safe Waters Initiative members.

Official data reports a 9.9% of near-drownings, but, according to the group's local survey, the rate of near-drownings in Shell Knob for the same time period is 31.8%.

With those solid statistics in hand, coming up with a way to provide local, affordable swimming lessons for rural lakeside communities is a goal worthy of pursuing, Rodriguez believes.

"We would also like to see water-safety programs integrated into Shell Knob school and other K-12 area schools," Rodriguez said.

In recognition of World Drowning Prevention Day, members of the Safe Waters Initiative, in conjunction with MSU's REACH Lab, will host a public education event on Saturday, July 25, at the Central Crossing Bridge boat ramp, from 10 a.m. to noon

"We've invited our elected officials, and we'll have our data information sheets available, as well water safety resources, games and prizes," Rodriguez said.

Rodriguez said a member of MSU's recreation department will also be on hand to check the fit of life-jackets.

"We hope to see everyone come out and learn something new," she said.

Rodriguez can be reached by email at MLancaster@missouristate.edu.

More information about the Safe Waters Initiative can be found at reachlab.org.

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included a discount on life-jacket prices from Bass Pro, the group was able to achieve the goal.

"We distributed 175 life jackets to the Shell Knob school and pre-school students, as well as to the children who attend daycare, there, and at Noah's Ark Daycare," Mahurin said.

Mahurin said before Swim Safe gave out the life jackets, she gave a presentation, which included advice on how to properly fit a life jacket.

First, check the label to decide if the life-jacket's size matches your child's height and weight, she said. Then, put the jacket on and make sure there are no rips, tears or broken or missing buckles.

"After buckling all straps and zippers, have the child raise up their arms, then lift up on the top of the jacket," Mahurin said. "If the jacket rides up above their ears, it's too big."

ON THE COVER: Colleen Mahurin, who started the Swim Safe Shell Knob non-profit, gives a life-jacket to a Shell Knob school student as part of the non-profit's goal of helping keep local children safe on the lake. Contributed photo

Conversely, she said, if it doesn't buckle or zip, it's too small.

During Mahurin's presentation, she also encouraged children to wear their life-jackets.

"Sometimes, kids think it's not cool to wear a life jacket, especially if other kids aren't wearing one," she said. "But, I tried to impress on them that anytime they're riding in a boat or jumping off a dock, they need to have a life-jacket on, even if they know how to swim."

Mahurin said extra life-jackets are available for the public, including some in adult sizes, at Green Mountain Realty, located at 24871 Highway 39.

To donate to the program, or for more information, people may call 417-858-2111.

Mahurin said, during upcoming school years, Swim Safe will be looking at a trade-in program, so that students can bring their gently-used life-jackets back in and trade for a larger size.

"We're also trying to come up with a plan for offering swimming lessons to Shell Knob children," Mahurin said. "Without a community pool, here, though, it's a plan that may be harder to implement."




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