

Post-Bulletin

Guest column: Remember, lake water can be dangerous this time of year

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By Earle F. Kyle, Jr.

For the Post-Bulletin

As the fall season closes, I'd like to warn your readers that our lakes are becoming very cold.

My son, Earle F. Kyle IV, and grandson, Nicholas Kyle, died in a canoeing accident Oct. 8, 2006.

It was a sunny Sunday morning on Big Sandy Lake in northern Minnesota. Earle had purchased the cabin two months earlier, to have a place to take his three sons. At age 41, Earle was in his prime and loved to take a break from his busy professional life as a vice president and senior legal counsel at Medtronic, Inc.

Eight-year old Nicholas asked his dad to take him out on the lake for one last look at the islands before the afternoon drive back home. Nick was Earle's youngest, a bright little boy with big round glasses that made him look like Harry Potter. He often said he wanted to be a scientist when he grew up.

Earle and Nick set out on the lake in a canoe. It was close to noon, and as they left he called back to the rest of the family that they might do a little fishing. Both wore life jackets. At that time of the year, it gets dark shortly after 6 p.m. It was about that time that Earle's mother got worried and called 911. By the time the sheriff and other rescuers got to the lake, it was too dark to find them.

The next morning a neighbor found Earle's canoe submerged near his dock. A short distance away the two bodies were floating in their life jackets. There is no way to know for sure how they ended up in the water.

According to officials, the water temperature was about 55 degrees the day of the accident. At that temperature, hypothermia starts to set in quickly and in a few minutes the hands and arms become useless, making swimming to a boat or shore impossible. Body heat loss happens 25 times faster in cold water compared to cold air. An adult in 55-degree water could last from one to two hours before becoming exhausted. Time before death depends on body weight and clothing, but at that water temperature it ranges from one to six hours. A small child like Nick would die in half that time.

I grew up in Minnesota and often went out on the lakes. My dad was an avid sportsman and we went fishing, duck hunting, and boating from one end of the state to the other. Sometimes we wore life jackets, and sometimes we didn't. I'm a good swimmer so never felt it was a problem. During duck hunting season we often were out on lakes where the water temperature was certainly lower than 55 degrees. I didn't know how fast hypothermia could make even a good swimmer helpless. I'm sure my son didn't know either, or he wouldn't have risked going out that day with little Nick.

I was living in New York when I got that terrible phone call. It still pains me to think what my son and his little boy went through as they suffered helplessly in that cold water. I hope this story might save other families from the grief of a tragic loss on a cold-water lake.

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