

Deschutes River Turns Deadly for Bend Family

by K_Guice

A fun family outing turned deadly on the Deschutes River in Bend when a family drifted into treacherous waters.

Young-Sook Kuga, 48, was pronounced dead at the scene after she was trapped in the rapids of the dam at the Colorado Avenue Bridge.

On Sunday, July 9, the family of 10 was traveling in two rafts and two inner tubes. Lacey Fertello, 21, was rafting with two friends just behind the group, she says the family didn't appear to see the warning signs and they weren't alone.

"My friends didn't see the signs at first either," she said. "I was telling them we need to get out right here; we need to get out right here." Even seeing the signs, Fertello said her group had a hard time making it to the takeout point in time.

The other group just kept going. "One of the girls lost her inner tube and was following it into the river. I started yelling, 'just forget your inner tube, get out of the water,'" she exclaimed.

Battalion Chief Bill Boos reported to the media that the family moved to Oregon from Hawaii about a week and a half before the accident.

Fertello said the group didn't seem to understand the danger that they were drifting into. "They were laughing and then they saw that I started panicking and they started to panic," she recalls.

Colorado Ave. Bridge near McKay Park "Everyone else had gotten out of the raft and they were trying to get her out of the raft, but she wouldn't get out," Fertello said. "She was grabbing onto the raft, looking at me yelling, 'help me, help me,' and there was nothing I could do. It was awful to see that and I couldn't do anything."

According to witnesses, the victim could not swim and no one in the group had on life jackets.

Fertello called for help, which arrived within minutes. Eighteen Bend Fire and Rescue personnel responded around 4:40 p.m. according to Boos.

Firefighters and swift-water rescue used ropes, ladders and a rescue boat to save the others from the river. One person was transported to St. Charles Medical Center-Bend, said Capt. Kevin Sawyer with the Bend Police Department.

“I saw her orange shirt under the water and I pointed at it and told the cops, “she is right there,” Fertello said. “I think they knew she was gone, she had been under the water for so long. They looked for her for at least five or 10 minutes.”

If there had been more signs and some kind of barrier, Fertello feels like the tragedy could have potentially been avoided. “It needs to be marked clearer up the river,” she said.

By the time she saw the signs herself, even being experienced in floating the river, she had a hard time getting to the take out point. “It was so fast. It (signage) needs to be further back and have a designated spot where everyone has to get out,” Fertello stressed.

That is the same complaint of an elderly woman who was rescued from the exact same location the day before. Shortly before noon on Saturday, July 8, crews responded to another water-rescue situation by McKay Park. It was reported that two adults and two children had gone through the dam's water control gates.

Geoff Frank, manager of Alder Creek Kayak & Canoe was one of the first people on the scene. “An employee was outside on break and heard the screams,” he said. “Another customer who is a swift water rescuer was there and we all went out. We were the first responders.”

The store is about 100 yards from the spot where both incidences took place. He says people have problems in that area so often they keep throw bags and rescue gear packed and ready to roll when there is trouble.

When the three arrived, they found two children tangled in the eye beams of the Colorado Avenue Bridge. “They were in inner tubes and were just unable to toddle over in time,” he said.

The 78-year-old woman, who was the children’s baby sitter with the family for an outing, told Frank she was confused by the signage. “They didn’t realize where they were at in the river and weren’t able to get off to the side.”

Frank explained that the two little kids had gone through the spillway and got caught up in the troubled waters. "The two children were tied together and the rope got wrapped around the beam," he said. "I was able to cut the kids free releasing them."

"Then I noticed the 78-year-old woman was trapped under the eye beam," he said. She was under the water and had gone unconscious when Frank pulled her out.

"I was holding her several minutes while we were trying to free her," she came to and was able to help us get her free," he said.

Frank, who is also with the Bend Paddle Trail Alliance, says they have known the area was a huge hazard and that it was only a matter of time before something tragic would happen in that vicinity again.

Last year, 21-year-old Michael Wilhite, a Bend Elks baseball player drowned just upstream from the Colorado Avenue Bridge after his raft flipped over. He was found to have been intoxicated at the time of the accident.

In an effort to avoid additional tragedies, Bend Metro Park and Recreation District had added more signs and installed buoys. However Frank and Fertello say more has to be done.

That is the goal of Bend Paddle Trail Alliance. They are trying to clean up unsafe hazards and raise awareness among river users on how to stay safe in and around the water.

On July 29 the group will have a paddle tour. "We will have different groups touring different sites of the river," he said. The tour is free and is targeted at educating the community about the various hazards to be aware of on the river and to rally community support to create change and make the waters safer.

As for Fertello, she plans to take her concerns to the city. She knows there are some who will say it is fine as it is and not to spoil the fun for everyone else. Her response, "You try seeing something like what I saw and then tell me you want to float the river with no safety precautions and no barriers."

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