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Waves to remember: Piers can be deadly places

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By **Martin Visser**
The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND HAVEN -- Most people are familiar with the story of Edmund Fitzgerald, the Great Lakes ore carrier that went down in Lake Superior in 1975 when the "gales of November" came early.

But the same storm that sunk the Fitzgerald also whipped across Lake Michigan Nov. 10, causing a tragedy here just as heartbreaking.

Three boys walked out onto Grand Haven's south pier that afternoon to "challenge" the waves. One of the boys was washed off the structure by a large surge of water and another dove in to try to save him. Eventually, all three ended up in the water. Two of the boys drowned while a third was rescued through the heroic efforts of three young men who were out surfing.

Bob Beaton of Fruitport remembers that night well because he was one of the surfers who pulled two of the three boys onto his surfboard. He also watched as one of the boys on his surfboard, deep in shock from exhaustion and the cold, was knocked off by a large wave just 50 feet from shore and never came up. Dozens of rescue workers stood by helplessly but could do nothing because the waves kept pushing the victims further out. The first boy had drowned soon after getting washed off the pier.

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"Pier rescues are nothing like other kinds of rescues. You hit the water and your clothes feel like deadweight and you're in shock from the cold," Beaton recalled.

Such tragedies occur with deadly frequency throughout the Great Lakes. This June, for example, 15-year-old Caleb Sutter and a friend were both washed off the pier in Frankfort. Sutter, and a dog that was with them, drowned while the other boy made it to shore. In September, 12-year-old Kyle Anthony Cuma was washed off the pier in Michigan City and also drowned.

In Grand Haven, high waves have claimed nearly a dozen victims off the South Pier over the years. There were at least four victims in the 1980s, and the following decade saw drownings in 1993, 1994, and 1995.

The last drowning incident, which took the life of 29-year-old Eugene Grochowski, prompted city and federal governments to look at new ways to make the pier safer.

The Pier Safety Task Force, headed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which manages the structure, established a new 911 call box on the pier. It also erected a large stone memorial "In memory of the people who drowned and in honor those who tried to save them," improved hazard signage and developed a dramatic pier safety video featuring a man recounting his experience trying to rescue a pier drowning victim.

Beaton, who has been active in pier safety ever since his experience, said he thinks the improvements have made a difference. No one has drowned off the Grand Haven pier in the last five years -- the longest stretch since 1983. The call box also helped save a life in September 1991. A man was floundering in the water and others on the pier used the call box to alert central dispatch. Shockingly, the call box, which is a cell phone hooked up to 911, didn't work because of a dead battery, but a flashing yellow light on top of the box alerted a nearby Coast Guard boat, and the Coast Guard was able to throw ropes and life rings to the victims. The call box has since been hard wired to the pier's electrical circuit.

"I don't know how many lives we've saved, but I'm sure it has helped. It's like putting airbags in a car. You start by

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doing something and it helps," he said.

But while Beaton said educating the public and the call box are good first steps, he believes more should be done. He wants to see more life saving equipment installed on the pier itself, especially throw ropes and life rings. First hand experience has taught him that's the only thing that really saves lives in a drowning emergency.

"Once you've got life rings, you're set. You've got something to keep the person afloat for as much as an hour and a half. Then you've got time to bring them in," he said.

Pier safety is also a cause Colleen Sutter of Frankfort has taken on since the death of her son. A long-time resident of Frankfurt, she and others never recognized the danger of high waves on the pier until it was too late. Now she and her husband want to prevent others from going through the same tragedy.

"Our child was aware of the dangers but it was a fun thing to go out there with waves crashing on the piers. Most of the waves don't come close to washing you off, but you never know when the big one comes. I've had a lot of adults come to me since the accident and say we did the same thing when we were growing up," she said.

That particular tragedy has spurred the Frankfort City Council to take action. Working with the Sutters, the city recently installed at least one throw rope and life ring stand on the Frankfort pier and more are expected to be put up in the coming months. The Corps and the city are also planning to install call boxes.

"After we started this, we were told we were the fourth group to come to city council and say why wasn't something being done. They knew it was time

and they didn't give us any run around. . . . In the past, they always said it was a big liability issue, but when they did it, it didn't raise the city's liability at all. It was the same in Manistee, so that's no longer an excuse," she said.

Sutter said she understands the allure of the pier but believes more should be done to make them safe in all communities.

"Piers are beautiful attractions as long as it's calm, but there are still unexpected things that happen. The last time someone drowned off this pier, it was a mother who was out there with her two children. But because she wasn't local, nobody did anything," she said.

The U.S. Corps of Engineers in Grand Haven say they don't have plans for any other safety improvements for the local piers. The official stance of the Corps is that piers are navigational structures, not recreational facilities, so people venture out on them at their own risk.

"The pier was designed and constructed for navigational purposes. We realize the public uses it for enjoyment, but (they do so at their own risk)," said Corps Civil Engineer Carl Platz who served on the Pier Safety Task Force. "We've taken the steps we feel we can, but we have to balance the liability with putting safety devises on the pier and look at the cost benefit," he said.

Grand Haven City Manager Ryan Cotton said the city has taken on the responsibility of checking and maintaining the call box on the pier but has no plans to make other improvements. The last time the Pier Safety Committee met, it rejected the use of ropes and life rings and favored the call box idea instead. Nothing has been done since then.

"They felt the risks of the life rings and ropes not being there (because of vandalism or the elements) was greater than other options and they opted for the call box," he said.

In Holland, Park Township Supervisor Stu Visser said the issue of pier safety has never come up for the piers at the Holland state park and on the Macatawa side of the channel. He said he does not

know of any special safety equipment on those structures.



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