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Education saves lives on piers

By KIM STRODE / H-P Staff Writer

MUSKEGON -- In November, 19-year-old Daniel Reiss and about 10 friends decided to tempt fate by "wave jumping" off Grand Haven's South Pier.

They made it out to the second lighthouse that day, despite winds gusting up to 40 mph and 10-foot waves crashing over the pier.
Daniel and the friends ran around the lighthouse, trying to jump the waves as they pounded the concrete. One wave caught Daniel and swept him off the pier.

His friends saw what happened and tried to save him. Some reached out to him, others tied their coats together, trying to make a rope to throw out to him. A girl called 911 on her cell phone. They all saw Daniel slip under the water. All they could do was watch and wait for help.

Sheriff's department divers couldn't go in the water for two days. The weather conditions were too dangerous.

They still haven't recovered Daniel's body.

To prevent tragedies like Daniel's, the Army Corps of Engineers and the Coast Guard gathered officials from across the state Friday in Muskegon at Grand Valley State University's Lake Campus to focus on community safety in the state's 18 Lower Peninsula harbors with piers.

Three of those harbors are in St. Joseph, New Buffalo and South Haven. Among those attending were St. Joseph police Chief Mark Clapp, fire Chief Kevin Luhrs and public works Director Roy Dost.

"As we all know, this (Lake Michigan) is not merely a lake, it is an inland sea," said Vince Deur, a video producer helping the Coast Guard. "It has extremely powerful moods and can overcome anyone."

Deur has produced a video, "Pier Safety: A Matter of Life or Death," that is distributed to municipalities, schools and organizations throughout the state. He and officials who spoke at the workshop agreed education is the key to preventing deaths on the piers.

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"We can never eliminate (deaths) completely," Coast Guard Commander Anthony Popiel said. "But we can drive them down.

"We don't want to scare tourists, but we want people to be aware of the dangers and to use common sense."

Respect the dangers

Sgt. Keith Koeman of the Ottawa County Sheriff's Department said people have to respect the water and the pier.

"These structures are for navigation," Koeman said, "not for recreational use. They are not a sidewalk, but many of us treat it as one."

The Coast Guard's Popiel gave a brief overview of pier construction so officials could understand the underlying dangers.

Most of a pier's bulk is below the water's surface, Popiel said. Many people don't realize this, and in most cases, the steel and concrete supporting the pier aren't visible to those walking on top of it.

Most piers were built in the late 1800s and have been modified a number of times as better methods of anchoring the structures were developed, he said.

Initially, piers were usually wooden, crib-like structures that were filled with stone. They were sunk into place, caps were put on them and the pier itself was built on top of that, Popiel said.

Later, the structure underneath was encapsulated in steel. This was necessary because water deteriorated the wood, he said.

Even now, Popiel said, piers have boulderlike stones anchoring them to the bottom of the lake. The force of the water carves out sections of the stone, creating pockets that people can get tangled in.

In addition, people who get swept off the piers by waves can be hurled into these rocks.

"Getting hit at full speed by a 250-pound NFL linebacker is the same as having a 10-foot wave throw you against the pier," said Nick Zager, a hydraulic engineer with the Corps.

At the workshop, Zager discussed the forces and patterns of the water around the piers.

"People really have to use their basic intuition when they're around these structures," he said. "This isn't some kind of amusement park ride out here."

One of the most problematic wave forces around the pier is undertow, he said.

This force is a current running in a different direction from the current on the lake's surface, Zager said. It can be very forceful and sweep people farther out in the water, where it is more difficult to find them.

The undertow current is caused by waves coming hitting the pier at an angle. The waves then get reflected back out and interact with more waves coming in, he said. This causes bigger waves and a more forceful current under the surface.

"Even if the water looks calm on the surface," he said, "there are currents under the water."

Educating the public

Popiel, who commands Group Grand Haven - which oversees Southwest Michigan - said pier safety is not just a summertime concern for the Coast Guard. He said the Coast Guard maintains the piers, and people, such as fishermen, use them all year long.

He said emergency call boxes, phones attached to the pier that directly dial 911, are crucial to fast response time from authorities. Without call boxes, the Coast Guard's average response time is 30 minutes. With them, it's 10 minutes.

Besides placing a call to police, there are other things a bystander can do to help a someone in danger of drowning.

"Don't jump in after them," he said. "People who go in after someone who has fallen from a structure usually end up being a victim. Throw something from the pier. Use a life ring or a throw rope. Use something that will keep the person from getting fatigued."

Popiel said fatigue is the No. 1 reason people drown. If you throw them something they can use to stay afloat, their survival chances increase by more than half.

Tom O'Bryan, a Corps civil engineer, said the Corps is trying to devise as many ways as possible to educate the public.

The Corps has tried to identify all safety hazards and post warning signs. These include the typical "proceed at your own risk" yellow signs posted at the entrance to the pier, and painted signs on the concrete. The painted signs may point out a grate, a step down, or an uneven surface.

The Corps has produced videos for children, as well as videos and brochures for adults. The brochures are distributed to restaurants, hotels, welcome centers and businesses near harbor communities.

Frankfort Police Chief Keith Redder said public education is important, and Frankfort's pier safety program has become the "gold standard" for Michigan.

The city created a pier safety committee after a 15-year-old boy drowned off the pier. In four years, Redder said, the committee has spent nearly $50,000, raised by the community and funded by grants, to safeguard Frankfort's pier.

Frankfort put in 38 life stands with life rings. Each stand has an electronic alarm that goes off when the life ring is removed. This helps deter theft, Redder said. The city attached 38 throw bags, a bag with coiled rope, to the pier. It constructed a sign with a deck and benches so people would sit and read the safety information.

Maybe the most important step the committee took, Redder said, was to give fourth-graders swimming lessons each year. Each class is given a refresher course two years later.

Education is the alternative to closing off the pier to the public, Redder said.

"We've tried to stop people from going on the pier before," he said. "We've had walls and fences, but if it's there, it's a challenge. And people will do whatever they can to get on it. You can't stop them."

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