

Surf rescue class a potential lifesaver, even for a denizen of the lakeshore

Written by CAROL POMEDAY
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<http://www.ozaukeepress.com/images/062713/beach-safety-Sm.png>

Program teaches avid lake user she didn't know as much as she thought she did about open-water safety

I live along Lake Michigan, so I figured I should learn everything I can about safety when playing in the lake I respect and love.



I often told friends who worried about their children, "Don't worry. We have three sandbars. It's so shallow they will get cold and come in before they're over their heads."

My favorite time is August, when the water is warmer and waves are high enough to body surf. It's also fun to be in a sit-atop kayak and ride the waves.

I have one firm rule: No one is allowed to be in the kayak or canoe or play in the waves without wearing a life jacket.

It turns out that's the only smart thing I was doing as a lakefront property owner.

During the Water Safety Surf Rescue program held Sunday in Port Washington, Bob Pratt and Dave Benjamin of the nonprofit Great Lakes Surf Rescue Project, opened my eyes to unsafe things I was doing and some simple things I can do to make it safer for family and friends to enjoy the lake.

About 70 people, including some Cub and Boy Scouts and several children, attended the three-hour program sponsored by the Port Washington Water Safety Advisory Committee. The committee plans to hold the program annually.

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The committee formed last year in response to the drowning of 15-year-old Tyler Buczek on Labor Day weekend and Peter Dougherty in March 2012.

During the classroom portion, Pratt showed slides illustrating rip currents, long currents, offshore winds and the dangers posed by structures such as piers and jetties in Lake Michigan. We learned about hyperthermia and how to recognize a person who is drowning — it's not the stereotypical person waving his arms in the air — and ways to save them without endangering our lives.

The class then went to north beach, where everyone practiced throwing a life ring, rope bag and life jacket. About a dozen people, including me, donned wetsuits and went into the lake to practice rescues with a surf board, rescue board, paddle board and life jacket.

It turns out something as simple as a water noodle can keep two adults afloat. A life jacket will support at least four adults and a surf board can keep a dozen people afloat.

We also learned an important mantra if you're in danger of drowning — flip, float and follow.

- Flip onto your back to breathe easier.
- Float to keep your head above water, conserve energy and calm yourself.
- Follow the current until it weakens. Most currents dissipate quickly as they move away from shore into deeper water. Ride it out, figure out which direction the water is flowing and swim perpendicular to the current toward shore.

Rip currents, which are often incorrectly called undertows, occur between sandbars. The current cuts a path in the sandbar, getting stronger on its return as the channel gets deeper, pulling objects or people out into the lake.

When there is a break in a line of waves — whether the waves are a foot high or five feet high — a rip current may be present, Pratt said, and people should be cautious.

A long current runs parallel to the shore or an obstruction and will pull objects and people with it.

Most people drown when the waves are under four feet because they think it's safe, Pratt said.

If an adult or child stops being active, watch them and be prepared to act quickly.

A drowning person will likely be hyperventilating, his head back, eyes wide and mouth open, unable to get enough air to yell. His arms will be under water paddling in an effort to stay afloat and his legs will appear to be climbing a ladder.

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It's important, Pratt said, to know your abilities before attempting a rescue.

If you see someone drowning and can't swim, scream for help and call 911, he said.

If you're on the beach and can swim, take a minute to assess the situation and decide what to do.

Between you and the water, Pratt said, there will likely be lots of items that can be used as flotation devices — water noodles, beach balls, coolers, surf boards, paddle boards, life preservers and maybe even a life ring.

“Use your cell phone to call 911, drop the phone and go into the water with the flotation device,” Pratt said.

The cell phone's GPS system will help rescue teams pinpoint the location.

It's important to go out with a flotation device, Pratt said, because a drowning person will latch on the first thing he can. If it's a person, he can pull that person under water.

“Put the flotation device between you and the victim,” Pratt said. “Talk to the person to calm them down. I say, ‘Hi, I'm Bob Pratt and I'm going to be your lifesaver today.’”

If a rescue team is on the way, keep yourself and the victim afloat until help arrives unless the person is unconscious and needs CPR, Pratt said. Then get to shore as quickly as possible and perform CPR.

If no rescue team is coming, determine the best way to get to shore and tell your plan to the victim, reassuring him everything will be OK, Pratt said.

Pratt, a retired Michigan firefighter, former lifeguard and avid surfer, formed the Lake Michigan Surf Rescue Project two years ago.

Benjamin, also an experienced surfer, joined Pratt in his quest to keep people safe on Lake Michigan after he almost drowned while surfing near rocks.

The Water Safety Advisory Committee plans to erect signs warning of rip currents in Lake Michigan and how to get out of them, put life rings on city beaches and along the breakwater, install call boxes on the beaches that will ring at the county dispatch center and get a WiFi signal along the lakefront.

On my beach, the following rules will now be enforced:

- Everyone will wear a life jacket when in the water.
- Everyone will have a swim buddy. If a person gets into trouble, the buddy can call or get

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help.

- A parent or other adult must be within arm's reach of a young child in the water.
- There will be at least one "water watcher" when children are in the lake. The water watcher will wear a sign and watch the children until relieved by another adult.

I also plan to get a life ring with a rope attached.

HEAVING A THROWROPE, David Benjamin of the Great Lakes Surf Rescue Project taught about 70 people how to rescue a swimmer in distress during a class on Port Washington's north beach Sunday. In the water, Benjamin demonstrated how to roll an unconscious person onto a surfboard. Photo by Sam Arendt