

Lifeguard is a hero among heroes

A doctor and paramedics credit the Weeki Wachee lifeguard with saving the life of a boy at Buccaneer Bay.

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WEEKI WACHEE - For 6-year-old Lakeyf Robinson, Thursday simply was not his day to die.

When a lifeguard pulled him from the chilly water of Weeki Wachee Springs' Buccaneer Bay his body was limp and seemingly lifeless.

Playing nearby in the water with his sons was a vacationing emergency room doctor. A few feet up the beach was a nurse. Arriving in minutes was a Spring Hill Fire Rescue ambulance, which just happened to be approaching the intersection outside the park when the call came.

"Somebody was watching over him today," said Spring Hill Fire Rescue Capt. Mike Rampino, a paramedic who was in his truck a quarter-mile from the park entrance when the call came.

Yet, for all the professional lifesavers around, the person getting the most credit for breathing life back into the boy was the teenage lifeguard, Ashley Jennings.

"The lifeguard saved this child's life," said Dr. William Fisher, the ER doctor from Saratoga, N.Y., who came to Jennings' aid. "This child would be dead if it wasn't for the lifeguard."

Fisher, who was playing in the water with two of his sons when the emergency unfolded, described the boy's appearance in stark terms.

"He looked dead. He was unconscious. He had vomit coming out of his nose and mouth. The only suggestion that there was life was that he had bubbles coming out of his nose."

Lakeyf was one of 66 visiting campers from the Central Pinellas Childcare Camp in Clearwater who were spending the day at the water park with 11 camp staffers, said Scott Goyer, president and CEO of YMCA of the Suncoast, which operates the camp.

According to the Hernando County Sheriff's Office, the lifeguard said she saw Lakeyf playing with other boys in the water about 12:45 p.m. One moment he was on his back and kicking his feet. Jennings assumed he was playing. But the next moment, she saw that the boy was not moving. So she jumped in and pulled the child out.

Goyer said one of his staffers saw the boy struggling, too, and helped bring the child out of the water.

On the beach, more than a hundred people gathered around as the lifeguard, the doctor and then the paramedics treated Lakeyf.

Fischer said the boy was having severe difficulty breathing until the lifeguard blew a few puffs of air into his lungs. After a minute or two, the child started coughing. The rescue, in the doctor's eyes, was flawless.

But Debra Dolby, a nurse from Hudson who was near the scene, and her husband, Don, a former Zephyrhills police officer, said it appeared to them the lifeguard panicked, carrying the boy too far up the beach before starting efforts to revive him. They even said the boy's head was allowed to hit a concrete retaining wall as he was being pulled from the water.

Robyn Anderson, the general manager of Weeki Wachee, said lifeguards are trained to pull victims far from the water in case it becomes necessary to use a defibrillator to shock their heart.

"She did it by the book," Anderson said.

Fisher, the ER doctor on hand, agreed.

"I think you could put this on Baywatch, really," said Fisher, a

former lifeguard himself. "It was unbelievable. It couldn't have gone better."

Once he came to, Lakeyf became agitated and started to cry loudly. He was conscious when emergency crews rolled him out on a stretcher to an ambulance. Eventually, a Bayflite helicopter flew him to Bayfront Medical Center in St. Petersburg. He was later transferred to nearby All Children's Hospital.

Lakeyf's condition was not available late Thursday. But Fisher said it is not uncommon for near drowning victims to be hospitalized for observation for a day or two because a sometimes fatal condition called "secondary drowning" can occur hours after the accident.

Weeki Wachee officials said Jennings, the lifeguard credited with the save, was too distraught after the emergency to remain on duty. She went home for the day and was not available for comment.