

QUESTIONS REMAIN AFTER 2 TEENS DROWN AT CUMMINS FALLS

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Posted by Hayley Mason

NASHVILLE, TN (WSMV) -

Serious questions remain after two young boys drowned while swimming Friday at Cummins Falls.

Some are saying it's a tragedy that should have been prevented.

Although there were trained lifeguards and chaperones on hand who were CPR certified, it is little consolation to friends and family members of the victims, **KeyVonte Cunningham** and **D'Donte Gray**.

The boys were on a field trip with the organization Backfield in Motion when they drowned.

"They were allowed to go swimming if they wanted to. It was just a tragedy," said Boots Donnelly, CEO of Backfield in Motion.

The field trip included 39 boys and nine adults. About five boys jumped into the popular swimming hole at the bottom of the falls, one parent says, but they couldn't fight the strong current.

"Two of them jumped in. They had a heck of a time, and we couldn't get them out," Donnelly said.

KeyVonte was trying to help his friend D'Donte when the boys, both 13 years old, drowned.

The group that sponsored the trip, The Great Outdoors University, has taken trips to Cummins Falls before. On Friday, the group had five trained trip leaders supervising and between them, four were trained lifeguards, three were trained in CPR and two who have scuba certifications, a spokesperson said.

Now the looming unanswered question is how the tragedy happened.

"Right now, we don't have all the answers that we want, so we are working hard to try to collect all the information we can," said Mike Butler, CEO of the Tennessee Wildlife Federation.

Some parents say the boys were supposed be given life jackets.

When asked who was supposed to bring the life vests, Donnelly said wouldn't comment until he talked to everyone involved.

"They were all asked if they could swim, and if they could, you may swim in this area. They said they could swim, and that's what they did," Donnelly said.

Jackson County Sheriff Brad Stafford says he wouldn't consider it a recognized swimming hole but people he been swimming there for decades.

The Cummins Falls website says it has been listed as one of the 10 best swimming holes in the United States by Travel & Leisure magazine. The state says it's a swim at your own risk area.

This is the first drowning there since it became a state park in 2012.

MAN DROWNS AT CUMMINS FALLS

Written by Tracey Hackett



JACKSON COUNTY — A 22-year-old Nashville man has drowned at Cummins Falls State Park.

The incident happened around noon on Tuesday, and park authorities say they are not yet releasing the man's identity but did confirm his age and address.

Other sources have identified him as **Reggie Grimes Jr.**

Following the incident, the park is closed to the public through today, but according to information posted on its web site, it will reopen to the public tomorrow.

Its Junior Ranger activities will proceed as planned.

The victim in Tuesday's drowning had been swimming in the pool at the bottom of the falls with a friend, and witnesses at the scene said it appeared that a current or undertow near the falls pulled the man under.

The man's friend was able to escape the current, and he and other swimmers attempted to rescue the man from the water.

Other swimmers offered assistance and began administering CPR before emergency personnel arrived on the scene. When emergency personnel arrived, they continued to administer CPR. Witnesses estimated that attempts to resuscitate the man were performed for more than an hour, but the man ultimately died.

This is the first drowning victim at the park this year, but emergency personnel say they have responded to the park numerous times this year in reference to falls and injuries.

Some estimate that there may have been as many as 25 injuries at the park this year.

Many of those injuries have been twisted or broken ankles because people who come to the park to swim fail to bring or wear proper shoes for hiking to the falls.

Emergency personnel advise not wearing flip flops for the hike to the falls but to instead bring hiking shoes or some sort of footwear that will provide a better grip on the trails.

They also advise being careful on slippery rock in and around the pool.

Finally, they warn people who are not strong swimmers to stay away from the pool at the bottom of the falls.

Emergency personnel estimate that the water becomes at least 10 feet deep in some spots, but the bottom is not uniform in depth.

Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN: 2 July 2015

Reggie D Grimes Jr. Obt.

Reggie D Grimes Jr was born about 1993, the son of Reggie Grimes Sr. and Schronda (Elliott) Grimes.

A resident of Nashville, Tennessee, he was 22 years old when he passed away on June 30, 2015.

Survivors include his mother; his father; a brother; two grandmothers; a grandfather; two great-grandmothers; and a number of uncles, aunts, granduncles, grandaunts and other family members and friends.

Funeral Services were held at Mount Calvary Baptist Church on Briarville Road in Madison, and burial was in Greenwood North Cemetery, Goodlettsville, Davidson Co., TN.

The Tennessean July 7, 2015

FUNERALS FOR TWO VICTIMS AT CUMMINS FALLS THIS WEEK

Posted Tuesday, July 11, 2017
BY LINDSAY MCREYNOLDS

Funerals are being held this week for the two victims of flood waters at Cummins Falls, where a sudden surge of muddy water Wednesday afternoon swept away some and trapped dozens who were assisted to safety by several rescue crews.

Services for **Peggy McDaniel**, 73, of Paris will be held today at the LeDon Chapel of Ridgeway Funeral Home in Paris with burial following in Memorial Cemetery.

McDaniel was among dozens who were enjoying the popular waterfall at Cummins Falls State Park on Wednesday afternoon, when what was described as a "wall of water" suddenly engulfed swimmers and washed them downstream.

Rescue crews sprang into action and brought about 40 people to safety, but were unable to find McDaniel until Friday afternoon, when her body was spotted by a Tennessee Highway Patrol helicopter pilot about a mile and a half from the falls.

McDaniel was a mother of five and grandmother of 10 and worked for many years as a nurse and a beautician.

"She was very active and ran several 5K races," according to her obituary. "She was very creative and enjoyed quilting, gardening and spending time with her family. She also enjoyed attending church with her children and grandchildren."

Her family has asked that memorial donations be made to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

McDaniel's 16-year-old step-grandson, **Dylan Thomas**, was with his step-grandmother at Cummins Falls last week and was hospitalized at Livingston Regional for injuries he suffered during the flooding, according to Chief Danny Lewis with the Gibson County Sheriff's Office, but is said to be improving.

The second victim of flood waters at Cummins Falls was a Hamilton County woman who, on a whim, sneaked into the park after dark to try to find the body of the victim.

The body of **Lisa Michelle "Missy" Hillian** of Sale Creek, 45, was unexpectedly found Thursday while rescue crews searched for McDaniel.

Hillian reportedly went to do her own search for McDaniel, but was not part of any official search crew, according to Jackson County Emergency Management Agency Director Keith Bean.

Putnam Assistant 911 Director Brandon Smith, who worked on scene command with the Putnam County Rescue Squad during the search efforts last week, said he didn't know of any connection between the two.

Hillian, a mother, was a national sales manager with CAS Iberia, which makes tactical swords and reenactment gear in Sale Creek. Her funeral will be held Wednesday in the chapel in Spring City.

"Missy loved the outdoors," her obituary reads. "Every day was an adventure, from hiking and motorcycling to skydiving and rescuing animals along the roadside. Missy's life was consumed with loving, caring and giving, and she left that footprint on every person she encountered."

McDaniel and Hillian are the fourth and fifth deaths at the falls since it became a state park five years ago.

Limited areas of the park have reopened following last week's tragedy.

Park and emergency officials have been looking for ways to make it safer, but one problem that Cummins Falls State Park Ranger Ray Cutcher has mentioned is how rainfall in north Cookeville affects the waterfall.

Photos of the falls from last Wednesday when the tragedy began show normal water conditions at 1:08 p.m. Then the flash flood of rushing water that trapped dozens and ultimately killed two was shown in a photograph 30 minutes later.

Cutcher said he's talking with emergency officials to possibly develop some type of warning system when it's raining in Cookeville but not raining several miles away at the falls — where all of that rainwater can end up.

Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN: 11 July 2017

Peggy Weaks McDaniel Obt.

Paris, TN

Peggy Weaks McDaniel, age 73 of Paris, TN, died Friday, July 7, 2017.

Peggy lived in the Paris area her entire life. She worked for many years as a beautician in Puryear, TN, but she found her true passion in being an LPN at McKenzie Medical Center working with Dr. Winkler. She was very active and ran several 5K races. She was very creative and enjoyed quilting, gardening, and spending time with her family. She also enjoyed attending church with her children and grandchildren.



Peggy was born April 17, 1944, in Paris, TN, to the late Hallie Howard Weaks and the late Ona Mai Wilson Weaks Pflueger.

She was married April 12, 2007 to David A. McDaniel, who survives, of Paris, TN. She is also survived by her five children, Julie (James) Taylor of Jackson, TN, Shane (Monica) Paschall of Milan, TN, Heather (Dale) Fair of Paris, TN, Matt McDaniel of Paris, TN, and Megan McDaniel of Toone, TN; one sister, Robbie French of Paris, TN; 10 grandchildren, Blake Spurgeon, Shelby Spurgeon, Matt Spurgeon, Drew Taylor, Alli Paschall, Luke Paschall, Dylan Thomas, Emma Grace Thomas, Brittney McDaniel, and Dylan Fair; and her mother-in-law, Marilyn (Gary) Deaton of Jackson, TN.

Besides her parents, Peggy was also preceded in death by one sister, Earlene Chambers; and one brother, Thomas Howard Weaks.

Arrangements are being handled by Ridgeway Funeral Home, 201 Dunlap St, Paris, TN, where visitation will be Monday, July 10, 2017 from 4:00 pm - 8:00 pm, and continue Tuesday, July 11, 2017, from 10:00 am - 11:00 am. The funeral service will be Tuesday, July 11, 2017, at 11:00 am at LeDon Chapel of Ridgeway Funeral Home with Dale Denning officiating.

Pallbearers will be Dr. Volker Winkler, Mike Troxler, Gary Deaton, John Dale French, Dr. Matthew Hughes, and Ricky Orr.

Burial will follow in Memorial Cemetery in Paris, TN.

Memorials may be made to: , 501 St. Jude Place, Memphis, TN 38105.

Published in The Jackson Sun on July 10, 2017

Lisa Michelle “Missy” Tufts-Hillian Obt.

Lisa Michelle “Missy” Tufts-Hillian, 45, died Thursday, July 6, 2017 at Cummins Falls State Park while assisting in rescue efforts there.

Born in Hamilton, Ohio, Missy was a graduate of Ross High School. She was a National Sales Manager with CAS Iberia in Sale Creek, Tenn. Missy loved the outdoors! Every day was an adventure, from hiking and motorcycling to skydiving and rescuing animals along the roadside. Missy’s life was consumed with loving, caring, and giving. She left that footprint on every person she encountered.



Survivors include her parents, Chuck and Sandy Tufts, of Spring City; son, Shane Allan Hillian and his dad, Allan Hillian, of Sale Creek, Tenn.; sister, Beth (Chris) Leavitt, of Dayton; brother, Chucky (Traci Campbell) Tufts III, of Sweetwater, Tenn.; and grandparents, Bill McFarland, of Corbin, Ky., and Charles and Dee Tufts Sr., of Spring City.

Funeral services will be held Wednesday, July 12, 2017, at 2 p.m. in the chapel of Vaughn Funeral Home with Rev. Bill Smithson officiating. Interment will follow at Spring City Cemetery. The family will receive friends Tuesday, July 11, 2017, from 2 to 8 p.m. at the funeral home.

In lieu of flowers and in honor of her recent mission to serve, contributions may be made to Missy’s Uncle Frankie Fund, c/o Vaughn Funeral Home, PO Box 129, Spring City, TN 37381.

Vaughn Funeral Home in Spring City is in charge of arrangements. Share condolences and memories of Missy at www.vaughn-funeral-home.com.

TWO-YEAR-OLD WHO DIED AT CUMMINS FALLS WAS FROM KENTUCKY

By Lindsay McReynolds and Paige Stanager and Ben Wheeler

The two-year-old boy who was swept away by floodwaters at Cummins Falls State Park Sunday evening has been identified as Steven Pierce of Eddyville, Kentucky.

His parents are Anna and Curtis Pierce, also of Eddyville, Kentucky.

Park manager Ray Cutcher said the boy was found Monday morning downstream of the falls in Blackburn Fork River less than a half a mile from where he was last seen.

Cutcher said the boy's father, Curtis, was also initially swept away by the floodwaters at Cummins Falls, but he was found not far from where he was last seen by the park staff.

"He was able to grab a log and pull himself out, but it was hours before we knew he was there," Cutcher said.

Cutcher said the park had been closed Friday and Saturday because of floodwaters but reopened Sunday because waters had receded.

He said they've closed the park several times since the two fatalities back in the summer of 2017 following a communication system with the National Weather Service.

Search and rescue groups came from Putnam, White, Jackson, Cumberland, Robertson, Macon, Monroe and Bledsoe counties as well as Lavergne and the Tennessee Highway Patrol helicopter to help those stranded by floodwaters beginning at about 4:45 p.m. Sunday.

Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN: 10 June 2019

CUMMINS FALLS:

A man was severely injured at Cummins Falls Saturday when he allegedly jumped over a wooden railing and fell approximately 50 feet onto a rocky area.

By Lindsay McReynolds

A man was severely injured Saturday afternoon at Cummins Falls State Park after falling approximately 50 feet from a bluff into a rocky area, according to Jackson County EMS.

Emergency officials said the man ignored directions from park rangers and jumped over a wooden railing before he fell.

Jackson County EMS responded, and the man was airlifted to a level one trauma center, according to Jackson County EMS.

"Jackson County EMA/EMS Director Keith Bean would like to remind everyone to please obey the new safety measures that have been implemented at Cummins Falls. These measure have been put in place with visitor and emergency crew safety in mind," Jackson County EMA said in a press release.

Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation Communications Director Eric Ward said Monday that they did not have authorization from the man to release his information to the media.

By press time Tuesday, Ward hadn't responded to emailed questions about the man's condition or if the incident will affect any of the new safety plans at the park.

The gorge area of the park reopened with added safety precautions and additional staff last week for the first time in two months following the June death of a two-year-old when quickly rising floodwaters forced the evacuation of the park.

The TDEC Cummins Falls Website now contains the new safety rules at the park, which include the following:

- The base of the waterfall is only accessible on fair-weather days.
- Cummins Falls is a natural area with inherent safety risks.
- The gorge is prone to flash flooding.
- Visiting the gorge is a very strenuous and physical activity.
- You should comply with the park's safety instructions.
- We recommend that children 5 and under not go to the falls.
- Children under 12 must wear life vests at falls and be accompanied by an adult.
- Visiting the waterfall will require strenuous hiking, swimming or wading through water, climbing rocks and crossing slippery rocks.

A safety video about the risks at Cummins Falls is posted at <https://tnstateparks.com/parks/cummins-falls>

Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN: 20 August 2019

<http://www.ajlambert.com>