

Woman Dies after Helping Save Three Children

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A 47-year-old woman died Tuesday afternoon after helping save three juveniles on Star Lake in Plum Lake township in Vilas County.

Karen Wessel, 47, of Star Lake, was pronounced dead Tuesday afternoon following the incident, which involved seven people on Star Lake.

At 12:39 p.m. Tuesday, July 22, the Vilas County Sheriff's Department received a 911 call reporting two adult females attempting to rescue three children who were out swimming in Star Lake.

In a press release from the department, Karen Altamore, who was present at the time of the incident, described the accident. She said in the release that she, Wessel, Janice Potocki (sister of Wessel), and four juveniles were on Trampers Trail of East Star Lake when they decided to stop to cool off with a swim.

The release describes the area they stopped at as an area where a narrow channel divides the shoreline from a sandbar in the lake.

According to Altamore, three male juveniles started swimming across the channel, but were too tired to swim back. Seeing they required assistance, Altamore and Potocki swam out, and brought two of the juveniles halfway back where Wessel met them and safely returned them to shore.

Potocki returned for the final juvenile, and Altamore, exhausted herself, saw that Potocki was getting tired trying to rescue the third juvenile.

Altamore asked Wessel if she could help Potocki, and Wessel proceeded to swim out and reach the juvenile.

The release reads, "Wessel was reported as using herself to push the juvenile above the surface to keep him from going under."



The Aspirus Medevac helicopter leaves St. Germain Community Park, transporting Karen Wessel, 47, to Aspirus Hospital in Wausau. Wessel was pronounced deceased later that day at Aspirus.

Dean Hall photograph

According to the release, an exhausted Potocki had returned to the shore when she saw that Wessel had reached the juvenile.

At that time, a pontoon boat operated by William Hintz had arrived on the scene.

The release states, "Hintz dove into the water to rescue the juvenile. Hintz returned the juvenile back to the pontoon where he had the juvenile hold on to the railing."

When the child was secure, Hintz observed Wessel floating below the surface of the water near the pontoon boat, and retrieved her and began CPR in the water, as he was unable to lift her or the juvenile onto the pontoon boat, according to the release.

At this point, Michael and Sara Errington, of Star Lake, arrived in their boat and were able to get Wessel on the boat and transport her to the East Star Lake boat landing.

The release states that Wessel was unresponsive at this time, and the Erringtons continued to perform CPR.

When the Erringtons arrived at the boat landing, Deputy Glenn Huelskamp of the Vilas County Sheriff's Office was on site and he continued CPR until Emergency Medical Services arrived.

Wessel was then transported by ambulance to the St. Germain Community Park, and then airlifted by the Aspirus Medevac helicopter to Aspirus Hospital in Wausau.

She was pronounced deceased at Aspirus at 5:20 p.m. Tuesday.

Plum Lake Fire Department, Plum Lake Ambulance, St. Germain Rescue, Boulder Junction Rescue, Boulder Junction Ambulance, Howard Young Medical Center Med 4 and Med 5 ambulances, Aspirus Medevac, Wisconsin DNR, Vilas County Emergency Management and the Vilas County Sheriff's Department all responded to the call.

The Vilas County Coroner is investigating the official cause of death.

An 8-year-old male was also transported to Howard Young Medical Center for immediate treatment related to the incident.