

Three men rescued from Merrimack River

By Caroline Louise Cole, Globe Correspondent, 1/10/2003

LAWRENCE - The city's newest ice rescue tools - donated after last month's tragic drowning of four youths - had barely arrived yesterday when Lawrence police officers put the Frisbee-like disks to use saving two police officers and another man who had fallen into the Merrimack River.

Sergeant Michael McGrath and Officer Daron Fraser fell through the ice while attempting to rescue Henry Hernandez, 32, who ended up in the frigid Merrimack River trying to save a dog, said Police Chief John Romero. Another man, who left the scene without giving his name, also fell into the water, but got to shore with minimal assistance. Also, one rescuer fell in during the operation, but was pulled out uninjured.

Called to the scene just 10 minutes after the Personal Retriever rescue disks arrived, Officers Brian Voisine and David Moynihan used the device to pull McGrath and Fraser out of the river. City firefighters rescued Hernandez.

Fraser, McGrath, and Hernandez were treated for hypothermia at Lawrence General Hospital and released, said police spokeswoman Ellen Murphy Meehan. McGrath, 50, and Fraser, 32, live in Lawrence.

"Everyone did a fantastic job, and fortunately, there was no human loss of life," Romero said. The dog, he added, did not survive. He said Hernandez was in the water the longest, less than 10 minutes.

The accident scene, almost directly across the river in South Lawrence from where Victor "Ricky" Baez, 9, William Rodriguez, 11, Christopher Casado, 7 and Mackendy Constant, 8, died Dec. 14, was particularly tense, Romero said.

"Of course, we all couldn't help but think of what happened here less than a month ago," he said. "When the first call came in over the radio, I could hear the tension in the officer's voice and I started praying. This accident just underscores how dangerous the river and the ice is."

Captain Michael Driscoll said Peggy McKay was walking her dog and a neighbor's dog along the river near the South Lawrence boat ramp when the dogs scooted out on the ice shortly after 9:30 a.m. McKay started out on the ice after them and a passerby saw her and called 911. When McGrath and Fraser arrived, they found McKay safe on shore with her dog, but saw that three other people were out on the ice trying to reach the second animal.

"The officers tried to call them off and one did make it back but when the others turned to come in, the ice cracked and they both fell in," Driscoll said.

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