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Firefighter helps develop patented rescue aid

By Mary Julius, enterprise staff writer

EAST BRIDGEWATER - Joseph W. Dupras Sr. of East Bridgewater pushed through thick brush to the edge of Forge Pond and flung the yellow foam disk past the icy edge and into the water.

As he pulled back the attached rope, the disk flipped onto the ice and skimmed across the frozen surface to shore.



"When you get to an ice rescue, it's difficult to get to the person without falling through the ice," said Dupras, a Randolph firefighter. "A drowning person could hold onto this disk, and it would give them buoyancy. If they were too tired to be pulled into shore, they could hold onto it until a rescue swimmer from the fire department could respond."

Each year as temperatures drop and local lakes and ponds begin to freeze, police and fire departments begin warning of the dangers of unsafe ice.

A new water-rescue device Dupras helped to design is being carried on rescue vehicles in Middleboro, Randolph, East Bridgewater, West Bridgewater and Pembroke and may soon help save lives.

"Next to having my three kids, the most important thing I'll ever do in my life is be able to make a difference in the drowning statistics," Dupras said. "According to national statistics, between 4,000 to 5,000 people drown each year."

The patented device, called the Personal Retriever, was developed over the past five years by Dupras and a group of six other men, including two retired U.S. Coast Guard master chiefs and a former U.S. Coast Guard rescue helicopter pilot.

Dupras, who is also a captain of the MBTA water shuttle Harbor Express in Quincy, is the New England regional head of Life-Safer Inc., which is based in San Diego.

Wade Borland of Hanover, a retired senior Coast Guard chief, is also one of the founders.

Another of the original founders, Paul K. Driscoll of San Diego, is a retired master chief with 28 years in the Coast Guard. He and Dupras worked together in 1980 at Montauk Lighthouse, where Driscoll was the head lighthouse keeper and Dupras was his assistant.

"He's the direct reason I'm involved in this," Dupras said. "He contacted me with an idea he wanted to develop."

To Dupras, what they came up with is a simple, but effective concept.

"It's a combination between a throw rope and a life ring," Dupras said. "It has 12 pounds of buoyancy and can be thrown up to 100 feet on full extension. The majority of drownings usually happen within 60 feet of shore."

The disk is durable, but also soft enough not to cause injury.

"If it hits someone, it will bounce right off, just like a tennis ball," Dupras said.

According to the American Red Cross, an active drowning victim has about 20 to 60 seconds before submerging.

East Bridgewater Police Chief John L. Silva Jr. has one of the disks in each of the department's nine cruisers.

"Hopefully, we'll never have to use it," Silva said. "But from what I've seen of it, I think it will work. It's very user-friendly."

Randolph acting Fire Chief Charles D. Foley Jr. has placed disks in all rescue vehicles and uses them as part of the department's cold-water and ice-rescue training.

"It's an inexpensive yet effective way to be efficient in the event of a water or ice emergency," Foley said. "I hope a lot of other departments use them. We go from town to town with our children and our families."

Middleboro Fire Chief Robert W. Silva has put the disks on the department's first-responder vehicles.

"It's like a Frisbee with a rope attached," Silva said. "If the patrol car or the squad (truck) got to the scene before the dive team, they could give this a try."

Six months ago, U.S. Coast Guard Chief Warrant Officer Kurt Neprud of the Office of Survival Systems bought 100 of the life-saving tools and placed them on 41 Coast Guard cutters for evaluation, including five in New England.

"He has approved them to be used by any Coast Guard cutter," Dupras said. "The reaction we've gotten from the Coast Guard cutters has been very positive."

The device, which retails for about \$99, is also being evaluated by the National Motor Life Boat Station in Cape Disappointment, Wash., and the Coast Guard training center in Yorktown, Va.

"It has tremendous potential," Dupras said.

While Dupras feels confident the design will help first-responders to save lives, he still may make one more change before making it available to the public next year.

"Right now, we're just selling it to professional police, fire and rescue personnel and the work-boat industry," he said. "We could possibly make it smaller to make it easier to throw, but still keep the buoyancy up."

For more information about the Personal Retriever, call Dupras at 508-350-9900 or visit www.life-safer.com.

"They'll make a difference if the opportunity to use them arises," said West Bridgewater Fire Capt. Allen A. Breer.

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