

Safety Notice Think TWICE

By Ken and Cheryl Williams

My wife, Cheryl and I have been boaters on the Columbia River for 40 years and have seen some interesting events, but nothing like the crisis that hit us on our way to the Port of Kalama for an overnight stay on May 21 2021.

As we cruised down river from Multnomah Channel in our 28' Bayliner named "Weekend Paradise" we were excited to see a deer swimming across the river just below the channel at Coon Island. We were discussing how lucky we were to see this, not a sight that is seen too often.

As we approached the Columbia River the wind was strong and blowing around 15 to 20mph. Just as we passed St. Helens about three miles downstream Cheryl noticed something in the river, it looked like a log or some type of debris pile. As we got closer we were able to see through our binoculars that it was a 15 to 17 foot aluminum fishing boat floating down stream. At first I had thought a Fisherman had fallen asleep or was having engine troubles, but as we approached we noticed the boat was empty. Both the outboard engines were up and the front bow line was in the water. I also noticed that the boat registration was dated 2013. Could this just be a derelict boat or one that happen to un-tied from a dock, we weren't really sure but we decided to retrieve it. We started to get ourselves set up to rescue the boat and call the Coast Guard about our discovery.

When Cheryl went out to the cockpit she heard someone yelling. The first thought was it was coming from the shore. I used the binoculars to scan the nearby shoreline thinking it was someone on shore yelling at us. We didn't see anyone and Cheryl could still hear a very faint call for help. I turned off the boat and we could still here a call for help. We looked all around the boat and didn't see anything. I then turned my binoculars to searching the water around the area trying to locate something. Approximately 300 yards downstream from the boat I noticed what looked like an object or a bird in the water. As we approached we found a young man just barely above the waterline. He looked like he had been in the water for some length of time and was just about to give up. His head was slowly bobbing in and out of the waterline just barely catching his breath. As we approached Cheryl tossed him a flotation cushion. The wind was so strong it caught the cushion and flew over his head. It was pure fear now... "What are we going to do, how are we going to save this man?" I backed the boat up to him a little closer and Cheryl used a throw bag. He was unable to grab it the first time. We approached a little closer and she threw the coiled line back at him, this time he was able to grip it.

Our next struggle was trying to get him out of the water. We discovered he was only wearing his boxers. FYI...it is very difficult to get a person out of the water with nothing to grab a hold of. He was so close to death that he was not able to help us at all, he had just given up. Cheryl and I were on the swim board together and we were finally able to get our arms around him and pull him onto the swim board. This was not easy task and we would not have been able to accomplish this with only one of us. He was so cold, clammy and as white as a ghost. As we started asking

questions, we found he was confused and was having difficulty speaking. We asked him several questions and we received several conflicting answers. "Are you alone? Is there anyone else in the water?" At first he stated that his girlfriend followed him in. We were extremely concerned that she was in the water. We quickly got on the VHF radio to notify the Coast Guard that we had pulled a hypothermic man out of the water and our nearest port was St Helens City dock and we would head that way. We had managed to get him off the swim board and wrap him with a blanket. He immediately started throwing up a considerable amount. Luckily we had a bucket to catch it. As we started to get underway, we turned the vessel to go back up stream and we noticed flashing lights on the Washington side of the river. We once again notified the Coast Guard that we were heading to the Washington side of the river where the emergency lights were. As we approached we noticed a sheriff walking up and down the shore. We beached the boat and informed the sheriff of the events, he told us he was out looking for him. We patiently waited for the paramedics to show up as we tried to make him comfortable as possible. Several resources were on their way and the Washington Fish and Wildlife boat showed up first. They were able to get their vessel up against ours and got him unloaded off our boat to the shore. We found out that the girlfriend was the one that called 911 and was safe and not in the water. We had done everything we could for him and now the professionals were to take care of him. So, we headed out to Kalama.

Cheryl and I are both avid boaters and have assisted many folks over the years, but this event really hit us both extremely hard. We kept replaying the near death look in this young man's face. I kept questioning myself later. What if Cheryl hadn't heard him cry for help? What if I discounted it as a derelict boat floating down stream and kept going? What if we had taken our other vessel with diesel engines and not being able to hear him? What if we just started to tow the boat out of the channel or Cheryl wasn't able to hear him? These questions continue to haunt us as we relive this event.

We reached our destination in Kalama, and spent the night still reeling with all the feelings that it produced and so grateful we were able to help someone in need. The next morning around 11 am we stopped to get fuel and noticed the boat that was floating in the water that started this whole event. It had been rescued and tied to the docks. Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife had towed it to Kalama. Cheryl went over to the small vessel to take pictures and to see if we could find any info to try and get the boat back to the young man. As she was taking pictures a guy approached her and asked "see something you like" as if she was trying to steal it. Cheryl informed the man that we had helped save the owner of the boat the day before. He replied "that was me, Andrew." They immediately hugged each other and he told us "thank you for saving my life." He was so thankful and said "If you guys hadn't been there I would have died." He said this hospital visit included IV fluids and his heart had to be restarted to get it back in rhythm. I asked him about what led to the events? He said his father had given him the boat and he, his girlfriend and their dog had launched the boat at St. Helens and they went down river. They beached the boat to go ashore when a large boat went by and its wake pulled the boat off the beach causing it to float away. He stripped down to his boxers and started to swim to the boat to recovery it. He said he had gotten close to it three times without success. Before he knew what was happening he was in the middle of the river and was unable to swim back to shore. We

exchanged info so we could get together later. We were all grateful that this event turned out as it did.

Of course, this has been a traumatic event for all of us. We wanted to share this with the boating community to make sure you are always aware of your surroundings and don't take anything for granted. Keep your eyes and ears open and remember to take action rather than be a bystander. Look for possibility of the unexpected.

Seek immediate medical attention for anyone who appears to have hypothermia. Until medical help is available, follow these first-aid guidelines for hypothermia.

First-aid tips

- **Be gentle.** When you're helping a person with hypothermia, handle him or her gently. Limit movements to only those that are necessary. Don't massage or rub the person. Excessive, vigorous or jarring movements may trigger cardiac arrest.
- **Move the person out of the cold.** Move the person to a warm, dry location if possible. If you're unable to move the person out of the cold, shield him or her from the cold and wind as much as possible. Keep him or her in a horizontal position if possible.
- **Remove wet clothing.** If the person is wearing wet clothing, remove it. Cut away clothing if necessary to avoid excessive movement.
- **Cover the person with blankets.** Use layers of dry blankets or coats to warm the person. Cover the person's head, leaving only the face exposed.
- **Insulate the person's body from the cold ground.** If you're outside, lay the person on his or her back on a blanket or other warm surface.
- **Monitor breathing.** A person with severe hypothermia may appear unconscious, with no apparent signs of a pulse or breathing. If the person's breathing has stopped or appears dangerously low or shallow, begin CPR immediately if you're trained.
- **Provide warm beverages.** If the affected person is alert and able to swallow, provide a warm, sweet, nonalcoholic, noncaffeinated beverage to help warm the body.
- **Use warm, dry compresses.** Use a first-aid warm compress (a plastic fluid-filled bag that warms up when squeezed) or a makeshift compress of warm water in a plastic bottle or a dryer-warmed towel. Apply a compress only to the neck, chest wall or groin.^[1] Don't apply a warm compress to the arms or legs. Heat applied to the arms and legs forces cold blood back toward the heart, lungs and brain, causing the core body temperature to drop. This can be fatal.
- **Don't apply direct heat.** Don't use hot water, a heating pad or a heating lamp to warm the person. The extreme heat can damage the skin or, even worse, cause irregular heartbeats so severe that they can cause the heart to stop.

Stay Safe