

Vermillion teen drowns in attempt to save sibling

By David Lias
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The body of a Vermillion teenager who disappeared in the icy waters of the Big Sioux River on March 14 was recovered by rescue workers the next day.

Madison Wallace, 16, apparently drowned after she entered the river to save her little brother, Garrett Wallace, 6, also of Vermillion, after he entered the water. The incident happened at Falls Park in Sioux Falls, in a stretch of river below the falls.

A bystander, Lyle Eagletail, 28, of Sioux Falls, also plunged into the river March 14 to help the two siblings. Crews removed his body from the river on March 16.

Garrett Wallace was eventually able to exit the river shortly after the incident occurred. Despite numerous eyewitness accounts, it is still unclear whether Madison Wallace, Eagletail, or both played a

role in saving him.

"We do have some sad news," Sioux Falls Fire Chief Jim Sideras told reporters early Friday afternoon, March 15. "We did find the young girl who went in after her brother. We found her in an area we where we thought it would be best to look for her."

The teen's body was recovered near a man-made dam located about a block downstream from the falls.

"She's been removed, her family has been notified," Sideras said, "and she's been taken to one of the local hospitals."

"I talked with the father, and the mother (at the time) was going back home (to Vermillion). She's now returning back to Sioux Falls," he said.

"They are still in a state of shock. Our prayers are with them, and we're just trying to help them cope the best that we can."

Sioux Falls has made

their fire chaplains available to the Wallace family, he said. "It's going to be a long, slow process for them."

Crews used backhoes Friday to remove ice from the river. The equipment remained busy through the day as the search for Eagletail continued.

"We're still looking for the young man," Sideras said March 15. "We still have some issues with the water. We still have ice to move out. We hope this will go fairly quick; we just don't know time wise because of the conditions that we have going on in the water."

Falls Park, a city tourist attraction where people often picnic and wedding pictures are taken, remained closed to the public on March 15.

"We don't want the public down here yet, because we still have a lot of trucks here," he said. "We anticipate that we could be here another 12 hours. We just don't

know at this time. We're still maintaining a dive team from Minnehaha County."

Sioux Falls and Minnehaha County law enforcement and rescue personnel quickly responded March 14 and began searching the river for Wallace and Eagletail. They were initially hampered at that time by heavy flows in the river.

"We had so much water flowing last night," Sideras said. "We were able to shut off the water so it's not as bad as it was last night. Last night, the water was higher, and that created an area for someone to be moved quite a distance. Especially when it (the river) narrows in and funnels – it will push a body quite a bit farther along."

Other challenges to searchers include debris in the water and undertows. The frothing water below the falls also

created a thick layer of foam that Thursday night, March 14, was 10 feet deep in places and hampered search efforts.

"It was also very cold and icy, and the granite is very slippery when it is wet," Sideras said, "so we're just not sure what caused the boy to fall into the water."

As heavy equipment removed ice from the river channel, divers wearing special gear to protect them from the cold entered the water.

"The divers are going in zero visibility water," the fire chief said. "You can't see your hand in front of your face. It's all by feel, so it's a very slow process. There's a lot of debris in the water that's going to slow up their process, too. They couldn't go in with the ice for a lot of reasons. The ice and the water moving creates a lot of

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The Alzheimer & Memory Loss Caregiver Support Group sponsored by the South Dakota Alzheimer's Association, will meet the 4th Monday of each month, 7pm, at the Sanford Administrative area on Plum St. Caregivers of memory loss persons are welcome to attend. Contact persons: Fern Kaufman, (605)624-4898, or Marilyn Abraham, (605)934-2534.

Vermillion Alcoholics Anonymous Group: A fellowship of men and women banded together to help each other recover from alcoholism. Meetings are held in the Post Office basement. Closed AA on Tuesday, 8 p.m. Closed AA on Friday, 8 p.m.


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