

# Canoeing teen's drowning death in Huron River holds a lesson for others

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Jeff Tautolo of Clinton Township tried to save John Przydatek, 16. / JARRAD HENDERSON/Detroit Free Press

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As they got closer to the base of the dam on the Huron River in Milford, Jeff Tautolo noticed the water was turning white.

The 17-year-old had second thoughts about getting closer. But he and his best friend, John Przydatek, 16, continued until it was too late to turn back. The power of the water was more than they bargained for Saturday afternoon.

The teens, on a camping trip with a church group, just wanted to go near the base so one could touch the water coming over the dam with his oar. Signs warn of danger in the area, but Jeff said the waterfall didn't look dangerous.

Soon, Jeff knew they were in trouble.

The canoe flipped. They started spinning with the boat like clothes in a dryer.

"I'd try to stand, but I couldn't," he said. "I was thinking I was going to die."

Jeff managed to stand on the canoe and reach for John, and the two touched. But Jeff fell off the canoe, lost contact with his friend and blacked out.

Somehow, Jeff made it out of the river alive. But John didn't, and neither did an



The force of the water can be strong enough to tear holes in an aluminum canoe. Recent rain has increased the volume of water flowing through the dam, which adds to the turbulence. / Milford Police Department

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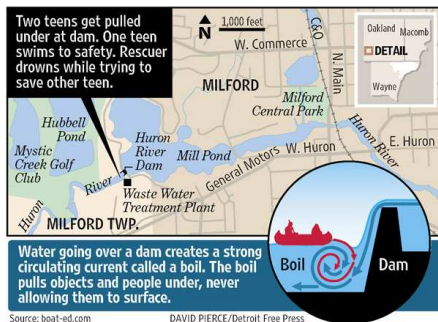
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Jeff Tautolo of Clinton Township is happy to be alive: "I'm the lucky one," he said. He would like to see more precautions around the dam, such as wire barricades. "I think the wires would show how threatening it is," he said. / JARRAD HENDERSON/Detroit Free Press

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experienced canoeist who rushed to help.

Now, Jeff's family hopes what happened that day can be a lesson for others.

**Milford considers new signs, fines to prevent drownings**

Milford officials are evaluating possible changes around the Huron River dam, where two people drowned and another person nearly drowned Saturday.

"Everything is on the table. We haven't really ruled out anything," Village Manager Arthur Shufflebarger said.

The dam's dangers are made clear on several signs warning of possible death that are posted around the area, but more measures are being discussed to deter people from entering the area, Shufflebarger said. Some of the possibilities include fining people who go beyond a certain area, adding a barrier or installing different signs.

On Saturday, John Przydatek, 16, of Harrison Township died after he was sucked into turbulent waters after getting too close to the base of the dam in a canoe. Doug Killingbeck, 48, of Milford tried to rescue him and also drowned.

In a separate incident Saturday, a 30-year-old kayaker from Commerce Township nearly drowned. He was pulled from the water by other kayakers and taken to a hospital. He has since been released.

"It was a tragic series of events. One after another," Milford Police Sgt. Matt Brumm said.

Police estimate that one drowning or near-drowning occurs annually near the dam.

**Water's power surprised teens**

Jeff Tautolo, 17, of Clinton Township, who was in the canoe with his friend John, said he would like to see added precautions, such as wire barricades, near the dam.

"I think the wires would show how threatening it is," Jeff said.

Jeff said he didn't realize how powerful the water at the base of the dam was until it was too late. The two L'Anse Creuse High School juniors -- along with two other friends -- broke off from other

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members of the church group while on a weekend camping trip. They headed toward the dam.

"I thought it would just spit us out right away," Jeff said. "Once we got close, it started sucking us in."

The canoe tipped, and the teens were in the water, fighting for their lives. "It was a struggle just to get some air," he said.

The turbulence pulled them down. Jeff tried to stand but couldn't. At one point, he got into a position where he thought he could help John and reached out for him, yelling, "John! John!" The two touched, but they couldn't hold on.

The force of the water ripped the teens' rented aluminum canoe in half, police said. Neither was wearing a life jacket.

"I was thinking I was going to die," Jeff said. He blacked out and woke up in a place where he could get out. The 6-foot-5, 270-pound wrestler was so weak, he could barely stand. The strength of the current had ripped off his shorts.

Killingbeck, who was in the area, rushed in to help John. He knew the dangers, his family said. The water ripped off his life jacket.

Police say Killingbeck's actions were heroic.

"He gave the ultimate sacrifice of his life, trying to save someone that he didn't even know," Brumm said.

### **What others need to know**

The recent rain increased the volume of water flowing through the dam, which caused the turbulence to increase drastically, Brumm said.

Despite the dangerous area near the dam, other parts of the river in the Milford area are safe for novice canoeists and kayakers, and several thousand people use the river every year, said Alan Heavner, owner of Heavner Canoe and Kayak Rental in Milford.

Jeff escaped his ordeal with a broken nose, swollen and cut face and bruises on his leg. He will be a pallbearer at John's funeral today.

He met Killingbeck's family earlier this week and plans to work with them to promote boating safety.

"I'm the lucky one," he said.

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