



THANKS TO COLE YEATTS, Kitty Hawk Ocean Rescue Director, and his mission to prevent drownings through education, Christina Lafex, 18, from Wallingford, Conn., was able to escape the dangerous grasp of a rip

current. Lafex credits Yeatts with giving her the understanding to know what she needed to do to avoid being pulled out to sea. She says Yeatts saved her life. (M. Artz photo)

Kitty Hawk lifeguards help prevent drownings through educational efforts

By MATT ARTZ

A true appreciation for the awesome power of the ocean comes with the realization that no one is stronger than Mother Nature.

But perhaps, through education and understanding, it's possible to be smarter.

Thanks to the efforts Cole Yeatts, Kitty Hawk Ocean Rescue director and his team of lifeguards to save lives through education, Christina Lafex, 18, from Wallingford, Conn., was able to escape what could have been a fatal situation.

Lafex, who was vacationing in Kitty Hawk with her family, was enjoying a sunny day at the beach last Sunday when Yeatts approached the group and asked if he could have five minutes of their time to explain how a rip current works and what to do if caught in one.

Though Lafex listened to what Yeatts was explaining, at the time she didn't feel that his on-the-spot lesson really applied to her.

"I was just like, 'whatever,' I'd be able to swim out of it no problem," she said later.

Fortunately, however, Yeatts' words would linger in her mind.

Later that same day, Lafex and other members of her family thought it would be fun to take a swim.

She says at that point she wasn't even thinking about the rip current, but as members of the group began to come ashore because they were being pounded too much by the rough surf, Lafex realized she was swimming almost to the point of exhaustion but getting no closer to the beach.

"I panicked at first," she said. "Because I was swimming as hard as I could but kept getting farther and farther out. But then I thought of the words that Cole said."

Lafex was indeed caught in a rip current. Everything was happening just as it had been described to her earlier that day, and that's when Yeatts' oceanfront safety lesson came into play.

"He said that you are going to panic but you just have to compose yourself and think about what you're going to do."

What she did was to start

swimming parallel to the beach, as Yeatts had instructed, and in short time Lafex was out of the rip current and was able to make it to the beach.

The next day, Lafex found Yeatts on the beach and told him how he had saved her life. She says if he hadn't talked to her that morning, "I'd be underneath the water right now."

For Yeatts, this is undeniable proof that his mission to be proactive in educating beach goers about rip currents, as well as other aspects of ocean safety, is working.

With so many thousands of people hitting the beach on these Outer Banks every year, it can be difficult for lifeguards to have an eye on everyone at all times.

This is one reason why Yeatts and each of his Kitty Hawk lifeguards talk to people on the beach every day, helping them understand better what actually causes a rip current, and leaving them with a better knowledge of what to do if they find themselves in Lafex's situation.

As Yeatts is eager to explain, a rip current is simply a hole in the sand bar. After water is pushed up to the beach, it is looking to go back out to sea, but is blocked by a wall of sand as a result of this hole.

As the water is trying to travel back out to sea through the path of least resistance, it creates a powerful underwater force that is known as a rip current.

The reason that rip currents pull harder during low tide than at high tide, according to Yeatts, depends on the volume of water above the sand bar.

"At low tide there's less volume of water," he said. "So more water's got to travel along that sand bar."

This can cause a 15 yard hole where the water flows with a river-like current that can pull a person directly out to sea.

Yeatts says that what makes rip currents dangerous is "if you do not know what they are and that you're in one."

"If you realize you're in one," he said, "you don't fight against it. You relax and you swim parallel to the shore just out of the width of that small channel, and then you'll have no problem coming back in."

Yeatts stresses that the key is knowing what a rip current is and being able to recognize how it works. The most important rule, however, is not to panic. But, as Yeatts says, "You won't panic if you do know what it

is."

In addition to these "in-the-sand seminars," Yeatts, who has been a lifeguard since his first job, visits the North Carolina Aquarium at least once a month to talk about ocean safety.

He has also recently begun speaking at various time-shares and rental complexes on Sunday nights, as new visitors are just checking in for the week, again preaching his motto of "education and prevention."

"Drowning is the leading cause of death for children 12 and under," he says. "With the right education, we can reduce that amount dramatically."

Yeatts says he is planning to start hitting the schools this fall and winter, hoping that by starting this education at a young age the kids will take it home and the word will subsequently spread.

"We're surrounded by water here and people come down here all the time," he says. "It's important that they get to know the traits (of the ocean) and understand it."

Through this education, Yeatts believes that he and his team are saving lives every day. Christina Lafex is a testament to that fact.

"I greatly appreciate it," she said. "It's very beneficial." She says even though Yeatts was not physically there when she got into trouble, his words were.

Lafex's father, Claude Lafex, said that he and his family have been vacationing on the Outer Banks every summer for the last

10 years, and this was the first time someone had come up to them, as Yeatts did, to help educate them on what to do if in danger.

The lifetime lifeguard says that whether it be on his beach, a neighboring beach on the Outer Banks, or some place on the other side of the world, the truth remains that knowing about rip current safety does save lives.

As it has been said over the years, knowledge is indeed power.