

Fire Department training pays off in rescue of capsized kayaker

BY AMANDA LARIVIERE · THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 16, 2021

Members of the Harvard Fire Department rescued a kayaker on Sept. 5 after he tipped over and was forced to cling to another paddler's kayak against powerful currents in the Nashua River.

"I've come down to that river for a number of different occasions, and I've never seen the water moving as rapidly as it was," said Robert Curran, a member of the Harvard Fire Department who responded to the emergency call.

The woman who had been paddling alongside the distressed kayaker had secured him against the side of her kayak with what appeared to be the safety cord for her paddle, Curran said. After she tied the cord to the man's hands, she held on to his life vest to keep him above water. "He was very cold and very weak after fighting the current and the temperature," said Curran, adding that the man was having trouble breathing. "Our main objective was to try and keep him warm, keep him comfortable, and get him back to the ambulance."

The Harvard Fire Department sent out their dive rescue boat to retrieve the man downriver from the Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge. While water rescues do not happen often in Harvard, the department regularly trains for them. As one of the first people to arrive at the station after receiving the call, Curran put on a dry suit, a garment that regulates body temperature and keeps the wearer dry, with the expectation that he might need to go into the river.

An integrated platform on the front of the dive rescue boat allows for quick retrieval and maneuvering during rescue procedures, which usually involve tying a person to a rope and inching them toward the victim. Due to strong currents and a tree that blocked access to the kayakers, the responders sought a different solution.

“It sort of looks like a pool noodle,” said Curran, referring to the 4-foot Styrofoam noodle attached to a rope that was used in the rescue. “We tossed that to her and she put it around her waist. Then we pulled the two of them back towards our boat.” The responders then notified the ambulance, which was waiting at the Oxbow parking area on Still River Depot Road, to turn up the heat and prepare blankets for the man’s arrival.

The Fire Department responded before the District 8 Technical Rescue Team, a regional team of firefighters from approximately 37 towns in Worcester County. In case further assistance is needed, a dive team within the District 8 Team is immediately notified whenever there is a water rescue, said Fire Chief Rick Sicard.

Before the formation of the District 8 Team about five years ago, Sicard said certain towns had their own dive teams or collapse teams. “Due to the lack of calls, it was very hard to maintain these teams,” said Sicard. “So all the towns became part of this tech rescue team, where they train on structural collapse, search and rescue, water rescue, and scuba diving.” Since the department has a dive rescue boat, they assist the District 8 Team with water rescues.

Curran said the department acts as “the tip-of-the-spear type of first responder,” and the District 8 Team has advanced skills and specialized training for situations where a victim might be underwater. But due to the Fire Department’s regular training and refreshers with water rescues, they were well-equipped and prepared to rescue the kayakers. “Whenever you have a situation where you have a positive outcome like that, it’s a good day,” said Curran.

The Harvard Fire Department races downstream in its dive rescue boat to retrieve a man from the Nashua River in the Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge. (Courtesy photo)

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