

# Northwest Drowning Tragedies

## Why are so many young men dying?

[Ramona Maxwell](#) ©1999-2010

In 1999 I wrote: “Since summer officially began on June 21st a spate of drowning deaths have plagued Northwest families. In Washington alone at least nine people have drowned in our rivers and lakes during June and July. An especially painful aspect of these tragedies is that despite extensive search efforts sometimes the body of the person who drowns in a lake or river is not found. Eighty eight percent of these recent victims were male and fully half of those were young men between the ages of fifteen and twenty. This pattern of young men at special risk is not new. According to the Washington State Drowning Prevention Project at Seattle Children’s Hospital nearly 83% of drowning deaths in the 18-24 age group were male.” Unfortunately, a decade later this is little changed. The [Drowning Prevention Project's website](#) states: “The ratio of teenage drowning deaths in Washington State is about [ten males to every one female](#).” while the Center for Disease Control states that in drownings at any age “In 2005, [males were four times more likely than females to die from unintentional drownings in the United States](#).”

Why are males, and young men in particular so vulnerable? An adventuresome spirit coupled with limited perception of the dangers inherent in swimming in a natural body of water may be partially at fault. In addition to this lack of experience a young swimmer may try to keep pace with friends who are stronger swimmers. And at an age when young men have a reputation for feeling invincible safeguards such as flotation devices, or swimming at a guarded beach may be ignored.

Another factor is the cultural bias for fashion and against devices which may be moderately uncomfortable to wear. If we put life jackets only on our children but shirk them ourselves we send a potent message that adulthood means shedding your life preserver. In an effort to refute that sometimes fatal thinking the U.S. Coast Guard's boating safety site urges parents to [Make Your Children Wear Their Life Jackets](#). To remain safe young adults must be encouraged to continue to care for themselves by wearing appropriate safety equipment. To accomplish this the Drowning Prevention Project sponsors [Summer Splashtacular](#) events throughout the state that include food, games, safety lessons and even fashion shows and [reduced prices on personal flotation devices](#).

Natural bodies of water contain strong currents and learning to swim in a static body of water like a pool will not prepare a swimmer with the skills needed to navigate an eddy or a rip tide. Dona Cassady, who nearly drowned in a fierce river whirlpool at the age of 15, said that she had used nearly all her strength in a futile effort to propel toward the surface when it occurred to her to dive down and swim out sideways, freeing herself just in time to save her life. Oceans, large lakes and bays present a different challenge with powerful rip tides that can move an unwary swimmer far from where he or she has strength to return from. The National Weather Service explains [what rip-tides are](#) and [how to escape them](#), advising swimmers to “Think of it like a treadmill that cannot be turned off, which you need to step to the side of.” and “Swim out of the current in a direction following the shoreline. When out of the current, swim at an angle--away from the current--towards shore.” Ocean Shores is one Washington community that has struggled with a spate of drownings, often from visitors who ignore or do not understand the posted warnings warning of dangerous swimming conditions. In the past two decades the Ocean Shores Police Department's [surf rescue statistics](#) show 15 people lost to the surf and many more in trouble but successfully rescued.

In Your Neighborhood blogger [Stephanie Frieze writes about her concern for a family venturing into the surf in the early evening](#) commenting; “There are rip tides that will suck even the strongest swimmers out to sea and on their way to Japan before they know it.” Her words underscore the need to scout out a body of water before diving in. Some are cold enough to cause instant hypothermia upon jumping in, making swimming impossible. Natural bodies of water may also have submerged vegetation and rocks. Since commensurate skill and strength are needed a little humility can be valuable protection when it comes to venturing into water that may be more dangerous than it appears.

Swimmers of all ages need to be aware that rivers in particular have strong currents and may not be a safe choice for recreational swimming. In 1999 our dear family friends lost their son, Toby Miller, who apparently went into the Salmon river in Idaho to rescue his best friend, David Rancourt. Sadly both young men drowned and family members who later visited the site said its surface appeared to be so placid you might wade in with children, thus deceptively concealing deadly undercurrents. Just as was highlighted in Ms. Frieze's Washington Coast blog, rescue workers note that visitors to the area commonly underestimate the river's dangers.

Water play on a beautiful Northwest summer day is one of the great bonuses of our region and with forethought it can be engaged in without undue fear of tragedy. Make swimming and water safety skills part of your family's education program and encourage young men in particular to *swim wisely*.