

Trapped Teen Rescued in Freak Beach Hole Accident on Topsail

Topsail Voice

By Amanda Hutcheson

Published: Friday, July 11, 2008 9:36 AM EDT

TOPSAIL BEACH – When several teens dug a hole near the water to create a pool last Wednesday they had no idea that one of them would become trapped as the tide came in.

Jake Powers, 13, and several of his cousins had dug the five foot hole, hoping the tide would fill it so they could go swimming, said Powers' grandfather, Richard Von Biberstein, Jr., of Burgaw.

Jake, of Newton Massachusetts, his cousins and other relatives were staying at Biberstein's cottage.

But instead of creating a pool, when the tide came in it swept in sand and after two or three waves, Jake was buried up to his chest. His cousins were able to get out, but Jake, who had been standing in the hole, was quickly trapped.

“At first I didn't realize I couldn't get out. I tried digging, but then it didn't work because the sand would just go back in,” Jake said. “I had no idea that that would happen.”

“The effect was like quicksand,” Biberstein said. “The tide was coming in. The rescue squad was called, but they couldn't get him out. Neighbors came; they were digging but not making any headway.”

Lou Hill, whose family owns the house next to the Biberstein's, said she was sitting on the beach with a friend when Brooks Biberstein, Jake's mother, ran up and asked for help.

“It was scary,” Hill said. “The water continued to rise. Lots of people came, everyone jumped in to do all they could. The police department, EMS, they just jumped in fully clothed. None of them stopped. I have never seen anything like that.”

Hill's neighbor to the other side, Scott Hunt, grabbed Jake under his arms so the teen did not sink further into the sand. Hunt and Hill then took turns holding Jake up until the Topsail Beach police and fire departments arrived.

Lieutenant D. Singletary took over holding Jake up, and officers and medical and fire personnel started helping to dig him out. Eventually the Surf City police and fire departments were called to help dig as well.

“It sucked you in, kind of pulled you down a little bit,” Jake said. “The police officer afterwards told me every time I exhaled, it would get tighter around me, so I would

suffocate before I drowned.”

“When the water came in around them, it made the sand around him almost like cement,” said Topsail Beach Police Chief Rickey Smith. “He was kind of in suction. Every time an officer tried to dig out, the sand washed back in.”

Others on the beach were helping to dig and trying to protect Jake from the incoming tide.

“Brooks, Jake’s mother, organized the kids to put up a wall of surfboards and boogie boards and so forth, to keep the water from coming in,” said Biberstein. “After about 30 minutes, the water was lapping around his face.”

“The time that I got the scariest was near the end when a wave hit me in the face. I knew that the tide was pretty high,” Jake said.

As that was happening, Singletary was able to get an arm under Jake’s leg, breaking the suction that was holding him in place. By the time Jake was freed, Singletary was buried to his knees in the sand.

Jake was taken to Cape Fear Hospital. He was treated for hypothermia and complaints that his back hurt and his knee was wrenched, but was released later that day and was back on the beach the next day.

“He was not hurt seriously, but he was in considerable danger for awhile there,” Biberstein said.

Hill added that the police, fire and EMS personnel responding were all helpful, even stopping to check on Jake the next day.

“They were most professional, helpful, thoughtful,” Hill said. “I was really impressed by them.”

One of the fellow beach-goers who helped dig Jake out was James Ormond of Charlotte, Hill’s brother. Ormond had himself gotten stuck in quicksand in Greenville when he was 12, and worked hard to help free Jake, all the while reassuring him.

“James stayed there the whole time,” said Hill. “Others would step back and let someone else dig. He stayed.”

“He dug and dug, he was like a machine,” said Biberstein. “He wouldn’t come out till he got the boy out. He was the hero.”

The effort to get Jake freed from the sand took nearly an hour, and by the end, more than 20 people were involved.

“If they hadn’t called when they did, if they had waited another 10 or 15 minutes, it could have been really bad,” said Chief Smith. “It would have been a freak accident that could have turned out really bad, but I’m glad it turned out like it did.”

He added that one other woman had died after being buried in dry sand years ago but under different circumstances.

Hill said she had been vacationing at Topsail all her life and had never heard of such an incident happening.

“The Lord was very faithful. It was a weekend that we won’t forget,” she said.

Biberstein agreed that the incident was unlike anything he’d heard of before.

“When the tide went out, you couldn’t see any evidence of the swimming pool,” he said. “It was all filled in.

“According to the people we talked to, nobody had seen that experience before, where someone got stuck and couldn’t get out. It’s not something I’ve heard of.”

Gilbert Jackson wrote on Jul 9, 2008 8:12 PM:

" This was not a "freak beach hole accident" but a deadly activity that children and their parents participate in at the beach. Doctor Barry Maron has published an article in the Journal of American Medical Association on the dangers of digging holes in the sand at the beach. Occupational Safety and Health Regulations forbid workers from working in trenches or holes greater than 5 feet in depth (except for solid rock) without some form of cave-in protection (trench box) and in holes less than 5 feet in depth, the trench must be inspected to make sure it is safe. Sand is the most dangerous and least stable types of soil to dig in and can cave in in a fraction of a second. I have worked in occupational safety and health law for over 14 years and have stopped while on vacation at the beach and warned parents that were digging holes in the sand for their kids to play in that it could collapse in a matter of seconds especially if the tide were to come in. The hole doesn't have to be greater than 5 feet, it just has to cover the child's chest so that he can't breathe. Also, the weight of the sand can crush vital organs and cause death. There are many articles

<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/07/23/earlyshow/contributors/susankoeppen/main3089871.shtml>

http://www.sptimes.com/2007/06/23/State/Beware_the_deadly_san.shtml
are just a few. An article explaining the dangers would be a good idea.

Gilbert Jackson

Beaufort native "