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Quechee Kayaker Rescued

Help Paddles by In Unlikely Form

**By Gregory Trotter
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Quechee -- For more than 15 years, Mike Backman has ventured on solo kayaking trips. He likes the peace and, over the years, has refined his camping routines to a science.

Never once did he imagine being rescued by 12-year-old girls.

And yet, as the Quechee resident stood on the shore of a Lake Umbagog island on Sunday morning, clutching the arm he had shattered in a fall near his tent, he was relieved to hear the distant giggles and chatter from four approaching canoes.

By then, he had been alone for 17 hours and had long gone through the pain medications in his first-aid kit.

The canoeists were seven preteen girls and two trip leaders -- from the Plymouth, Vt.-based Farm and Wilderness organization -- forming a boisterous flotilla near the end of a four-day trip on the vast lake.

At first, Backman was hesitant about asking for help, thinking canoe travel would take too long; the pain had become excruciating.

But when they offered him a ride in the middle of the leaders' canoe, he accepted. It was the right decision.

"Their spirits really lifted me up. They were such a great group of girls," said Backman, the 48-year-old director of Alumni Relations at Dartmouth College, absently rubbing the thick cast on his left arm yesterday outside the Dirt Cowboy coffee shop in Hanover.

The island is near the Androscoggin River in the largest lake on the border of New Hampshire and Maine. He had arrived on Saturday with plans of spending five days there, pulling up to the shore in his kayak towing a small inflatable boat loaded with firewood.

As he was setting up his tent -- a simple task he had performed countless times before -- he tripped on the bottom flap of the tent door and went down, landing awkwardly on a tree root. Immediately, he felt intense pain and walked to a picnic table where he passed out, Backman said. It was still light out when he regained consciousness.

He fashioned a sling out of spare clothes. He delved into his first aid kit and found some Tylenol and ibuprofen that had expired in 2005.

For those who have ever wondered about the efficacy of expired drugs, Backman reported: "They worked."

He made a fire with his good arm, ate half a sandwich and slept a little. On Sunday morning, the pain was much worse but he did not yet know that his radial head bone had broken into six pieces -- a fracture commonly seen in adults falling with an outstretched arm. He had thought it was maybe just a bad sprain, which is why he didn't flag a boat down on Saturday evening.

"One boat came by and I debated whether I should yell out to them," he said. "But I thought it would be foolish if it was just a bad sprain."

As it turned out, the all-girls group stopped Sunday, at about 10 a.m., and asked Backman for confirmation of direction, said Anna Williams, 19, one of the group's two leaders. After some initial conversation, it became clear that Backman was badly injured. Williams and her colleague, Mary Catherine Muniz, deliberated and decided to offer him a ride.

They loaded him into the middle of the canoe and set off for the dock at the mouth of the Androscoggin, about three miles away. It ended up benefiting all parties involved, Williams said.

Farm and Wilderness is a Quaker youth organization that focuses on outdoor education, community and adventure, according to its Web site. The group that picked up Backman was the Indian Brook group, for girls between 9 and 14.

The girls were enthusiastic about helping Backman, Williams said, and included the rescue in the post-trip skits they performed upon returning to Plymouth.

"There was definitely a Good Samaritan lesson there," she said. "The girls were pretty pumped to be able to help Mike and get him back to safety."

Upon return, Backman drove to a medical clinic in Berlin, N.H., and had his arm set into a cast. Park rangers retrieved his camping gear. He heads into surgery today and he hopes to take the campers out to breakfast later this week to thank them.

He has no plans to stop camping solo, though. A Unitarian, Backman likened the serenity that comes with solitude in nature to "Zen meditation."

But he did learn something from his experience.

"Watch your feet," he said.

UPDATE FROM FARM AND WILDERNESS STAFF:

Mike Backman said Aug. 5 he had surgery on his arm, broken in six places, at the Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center.

He said he is very grateful for the Indian Brook rescue. To show his appreciation, he donated \$250 online to Farm & Wilderness and said he hopes to share a meal with campers and staff at Indian Brook.

Pieter Bohlen, executive director at Farm & Wilderness, said he was heartened by the actions of the Indian Brook campers and counselors.

“These exemplary campers and counselors demonstrated the power of our core value of empathy,” Bohlen said. “And their effectiveness demonstrated the power of good training.”

The story of the Indian Brookers rescue, which was a front-page article in the Valley News on Aug. 4, was transmitted by the Associated Press wire service throughout New England.