

Watch the kids around the swimming pool

Drowning is the leading cause of death for young children

BY MICHELLE L. START
Florida Weekly Correspondent

Carri Roncaglione was busy tidying up the house and only turned away for a few moments, but those moments will haunt her forever.

In that time her niece and 16-month-old son, Brendan, managed to get out the sliding glass doors and into the pool area.

Roncaglione found her son face down in the pool. He was rushed to the hospital, where he was placed on life support for 13 days until on Oct. 17, 2004, he died.

"We had only lived in our home for four months," she said. "The people who lived here before were an older couple and they didn't have a gate around the pool. We planned on putting one up, but then (Hurricane) Charley came. It messed up the pool cage and then we just kept on putting it off."

The accident has made Roncaglione into an advocate of drowning safety measures.

As temperatures have begun climbing to unseasonably high (The National Weather Service in Tampa said 2008 has been the 11th warmest season since they began keeping records in 1891), officials are trying to get the word out about how to prevent drowning. The drowning rate jumps by 50 percent this month and continues to climb until October every year in Southwest Florida, said Diane Holm, spokeswoman for Lee County Public Safety.

"Drowning is the leading cause of death for children between the ages of 1 to 5," she said. "It is the second leading cause of death for children under 14."

She said Florida accounts for 15 percent of all drowning across the nation. There are an estimated 1.1 million pools in the state of Florida, which increases accessibility and accounts for the high percentage of drownings, Holm said. There are an average of 73 drowning deaths every year, with about five of those occurring in Lee County.

"That's five whole families that are utterly devastated," she said.

Additionally, there are some 198 reported near drownings every year across the state, she said. Those involve victims such as Brendan Roncaglione who did not immediately die from their experience. Holm said these are the people who are brain damaged from lack of oxygen and can live for up to 20 years



but never again have the same quality of life. Those victims ultimately succumb to the injuries they received in their near-drowning, according to Holm.

She said that number is also under-reported.

"It is poor data," Holm said. "Hospitals don't always report it and if they do, it's not always accurate. The real statistics are anywhere from four to ten times the number of children who die."

As a way of increasing awareness, officials will hold a Water Safety Day on Saturday, March 29. The activities will be held throughout the county at 10 different facilities and will offer everything from free swimming lessons to sun block samples.

For more information, contact Diane Holm at (239) 335-1639. ■

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