

# Carly had been underwater for 45 minutes

# Three feet from her next breath

By Gail Wood

Four days after Carly Boehm nearly drowned during a canoe accident on Washington's Wenatchee River, she slowly raised her arm from her hospital bed and waved to her mother.

Barbara Boehm cried. It was a miracle her daughter was alive. Carly had been underwater for 45 minutes.

"The doctors have used the word 'miracle' over and over again," Barbara says.

Carly, 16, had never been in a canoe. Neither had Ruben Andrews and Marya Danzer, two of Carly's best friends. On April 15, 2000, a cold Saturday morning, all three carefully stepped into a 14-foot, aluminum canoe and pushed off into the swift waters. Carly was in the middle. Because of unusually high rainfall and melting snow, the river was rushing at about 21,000 gallons per second, the highest rate in years.

They hadn't gone more than a few hundred yards when their canoe overturned, dumping the three friends into the snow-fled waters and sweeping them downriver. With their bright yellow life jackets keeping them afloat, they swam to a little sandy island. Ruben pushed the canoe to shore.

"I don't want to get back into that canoe," Carly protested, shivering with cold.

Ruben pointed to a sandy beach downriver just past the Sleepy Hollow Bridge. He felt it was their only escape.

Returning to the river, they approached the narrow, two-lane bridge. Then the canoe shifted broadside. Ruben spotted a boulder.

"Paddle harder," Ruben shouted.

But the canoe struck a pillar under the bridge and capsized. Ruben and Marya, thrown free of the canoe, swam to shore and safety.

Carly fought to free herself. The tremendous force of the river wrapped the canoe around the bridge support, collapsing one side of the canoe and clamping tightly on Carly's leg. She was just three feet under the surface in water that was about 40 feet deep at the bridge.

One minute passed. Two minutes passed. Someone from the shore saw Carly's hand frantically waving above the water and dialed 911 on a cell phone. It was 2:49 in the afternoon.

Just then, Everett Gahringer, a volunteer policeman patrolling the river in his 15-foot aluminum boat, spotted Carly's upraised hand. He revved his 100-horsepower motor and quickly pulled next to the overturned canoe. He could see Carly struggling.

As Gahringer fought to hold his boat still, a friend onboard reached toward Carly. Their hands nearly touched.

Three minutes passed. Carly's hand went limp.

"Please God, save this girl," Gahringer prayed. "Don't let her die."

Frantically, Gahringer wrapped a rope around the canoe. He circled the canoe several times, fruitlessly tugging at the rope in the hope of jarring Carly free.

Ten minutes passed.

Three men in the sheriff's V8 inboard jet-engine boat arrived and tried pulling the canoe free. Again it was futile. Tons of water pushed against the canoe.

Fifteen minutes passed. Twenty minutes.

## Three feet from her next breath

Not knowing what to do, Gahringer went to shore, thinking the rescue was over. It was now about 3:15. Carly had been underwater for 26 minutes. Everyone thought it was too late to save her, but Shawn Ballard, one of the medics on the scene, knew the icy waters slowed Carly's body and extended her chances of surviving.

"Let's try again," Ballard yelled through cupped hands, setting into action another rescue attempt. "We've got until 3:30."

Just then, a yellow county fire truck rolled onto the bridge. A hole was punched through the side of the canoe and a cable was attached. The tires of the fire truck bounced under the strain of the winch, which was capable of pulling 30,000 pounds. Slowly, the canoe began to rise and the sheriff's boat rammed it.

Carly surfaced.

Gahringer revved his motor and raced downriver to retrieve her.

After being underwater for 45 minutes, Carly was free. She wasn't breathing and her heart had stopped. But now at least she had a chance.

Inside the ambulance, Ballard used shock pads to jolt Carly's heart back to life. It stopped, started and stopped again. Ballard injected adrenaline directly into her heart. All this time, Ballard, a Christian, was praying, "God, please save this girl."

Carly's body temperature was 72 degrees when she arrived at the hospital. Doctors didn't think she'd live through the night. But four days after nearly drowning, Carly slowly raised her arm and waved to her mom, who was sitting by Carly's hospital bed. It was a miracle. Carly was alive.

Carly's recovery wasn't over.

## TOUGH LOVE

As Carly Boohm relearned how to walk, talk and read after nearly drowning, her father maintained loving expectations that helped push her through recovery.

Each day, Phil Boohm took a defiant Carly to the track. "OK, Carly, are you going to walk or am I going to drag you?" he challenged her.

"Pretty soon she started walking," Phil says. "I had to take a risk. She couldn't grasp the concept of walking. I had to push her."

At first, it took them 45 minutes to do one lap.

"She fought me," Phil says.

But through Phil's persistence, Carly, once a starter on her high school soccer and track teams, relearned how to walk.

"Fortunately, my faith is strong enough," Phil says. "I told the doctor who was working on Carly that I had faith in him. He told me to put my faith in God so He could work through him."

When Phil first got the phone call from the hospital that Carly was in critical condition, he anticipated the worst.

"I just started thanking God for Carly's life," Phil says. "Then there was this wonderful feeling of peace. I thought that everything was going to be all right."

— Gail Wood

The straight-A student had to relearn how to walk and talk. Reading a third-grader's book was a struggle. She spent two and a half months in the hospital and went to physical therapy, occupational therapy and speech therapy for months after the near drowning. She appeared on

*Dateline* and *The Today Show*.

"We feel that God has given Carly back to us," says Carly's father, Phil. "She's an answer to prayer." **tpe**

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E-mail your comments to [tpe@ag.org](mailto:tpe@ag.org).

## Seven safety tips for canoeing

1. Know your limitations and don't underestimate the power of a river.
2. Know the river. Look ahead for bends, log jams or potential hazards.
3. Always wear a life vest when canoeing. Buckle it. Keep it tight.
4. When getting in a canoe, crouch and walk along the center. Kneel when in rapids to lower your center of gravity. Avoid sudden jerky movement.
5. If you fall out, keep your feet ahead of you as you float downriver. If you come to snags, go headfirst so you can push yourself over the debris.
6. Steer the canoe straight downstream as you exit a bend in the river, but still keep to the inside of the bend.
7. If the canoe tips, stay with it and try to push it ashore. A canoe will float even when full of water.

— Bob Jordan, a guide with *Wild River Adventures in Montana's Glacier National Park*



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