

KEEPING IT SAFE ON THE WATER



Michael Dunlap/The News-Star

Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries agents John Miller, rear left, and Scott Mathew, near left, check Robert Griffin's, rear right, boat registration on Bayou DeSiard. Bobby Smith is fishing on the right.

One year later, accident prompts new safety laws

Louisiana ranked fifth in boating deaths in 2007

By Matthew Hamilton

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Helena Altick remembers May 20, 2008, in very stark terms.

"It was the worst of everything you could possibly imagine," she said.

On that day, her teenage son Trey took a ride on the back of a personal watercraft to meet a friend on a boat on Bayou DeSiard.

According to Helena Altick, an eyewitness said the driver tore across the bayou at 60 mph, leaning it over so far that the handlebars nearly touched the water.

Trey Altick was thrown from his seat, knocked unconscious and drowned. He was 15 years old.

One year after his death, the Altick

family is pursuing a bill to test alcohol abuse on state waters, and the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries is pushing for more life jackets and boater education.

The height of boating season is about to begin, and Louisiana ranked fifth in boating deaths in 2007, according to Coast Guard statistics.

Capt. Alan Bankston, regional supervisor of LDWF law enforcement, said

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ACCIDENT

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90 percent of those who died on state waters were not wearing a life jacket and 23 percent of the incidents involved alcohol.

On April 25, LDWF agents found the body of 58-year-old Farmerville native Jimmy Holly floating in Lake D'Arbonne. Bankston said bad weather probably tossed wave after wave into Holly's boat, causing it to sink. Agents also found an unused life jacket.

A new law this year makes life jackets mandatory for all occupants of a boat 16 feet in length or less if the boat has a tiller motor.

Bankston said people should keep aware of their surroundings and local weather patterns. He also urged them to use caution as waters swell to near-flood heights and conceal potential

hazards.

"With backwater channels flowing into the Ouachita River, you get a lot of submerged logs," Bankston said. "If that boat hits that log or a stump, it will throw the occupant. If he goes in the water, his chances of survival drop."

Helena Altick said her son wasn't wearing a life jacket when he went in the water. She said the group of teens, which had been out on the bayou for three hours, had taken all the life jackets from the dock and left them on the floor of the boat before Trey hopped aboard the watercraft.

"We live on the water and raised our kids to be super safe," Helena Altick said.

The Altick family established a foundation in Trey Altick's name which supports causes that were close to his heart, including food for the homeless and a scholarship to LSU for a graduating Neville High School senior.

The family has also lent Trey Altick's name to a bill requiring substance-abuse testing after serious injury or death involving watercraft.

Helena Altick suspects alcohol was involved in the crash and said the family had a difficult time getting the case investigated because officers only tested her son's body for alcohol.

"One good thing is an hour before, he had just called and said, 'I love you,'" Helena Altick said. "He was the best. He was a straight-A student, a baseball player. They don't come any better than him, and that's why this is such a tragedy.

"He was my best friend, his dad's best friend and he and our daughter, whose birthday it was the day he died, were best buddies.

"The sad thing is he was only on that Jet Ski for about two minutes. Something has to be done."