Shallow Water Blackout Awareness Fatality File

What is Shallow Water Blackout? A Family’s Push to Educate and Prevent Tragedy

A Vermont family is spreading awareness of swimming dangers – hoping to prevent a tragedy like the one they suffered.

Ben Haller of Underhill died in the Bahamas from what’s known as a shallow water blackout. The emergency arises when your brain doesn’t have enough oxygen, following activities such as repetitive breath-holding.

Basically, a shallow water blackout causes someone to faint underwater, where they can then drown.

Haller, who often went by “Benjo,” was spearfishing at the time of his blackout. He was alone when doing that activity which featured repeated breath-holding, his family said,

His family now has a foundation called Live Like Benjo. Wednesday, the organization was in Colchester, explaining to kids what can cause a shallow water blackout.

The foundation strongly urged the children to not play breath-holding games, to never ignore the urge to breathe, and to always swim with other people – who can look out for you.

“Rescue is so imperative – that it is immediate with a shallow water blackout,” explained Dani Haller Bedford, Ben’s sister, amplifying the call to not swim alone. “Because your oxygen levels are already very low in your body, so if you’re not getting CPR or oxygen immediately, the chance for survival is very low.”

Money raised from the Live Like Benjo foundation funds sailing

lessons and other opportunities for Vermont youth.

Ben Haller worked as an instructor at the International Sailing School and Club on Malletts Bay, which is hosting kids from the Boys & Girls Club this week with the foundation's support.

Robin Doyle, the sailing school's president, said it has been nice to have the Boys & Girls Club members at the center, both for fun and for those important safety lessons.

"We missed two years because of COVID," Doyle noted. "But we're real excited to have them back. This is their third day, and they come for the whole week, Monday through Friday, and it's just wonderful to get them out on Malletts Bay and livin' like Benjo, because this is exactly what Benjo did."

The national group Shallow Water Blackout Prevention says on its website the problem can affect anyone in any body of water – even very experienced, physically fit swimmers.