

River claims lives of people not using preservers

by Geoff Kennedy
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for the Tundra Times

BETHEL — Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta waters have claimed 174 lives since 1979, and some residents want to do something about it.

"We have become complacent," said Bethel resident Chuck Hunt, whose 14-year-old cousin died in a boating accident near Kotlik this summer.

Yup'ik values

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"Water is a way of transportation on both the Yukon and the Kuskokwim, and I think that a lot of the times people become comfortable with the equipment that they have, not realizing that there are safety problems involved."

Hunt's cousin, Johnny Keyes, died July 14. He was piloting a boat near Kotlik with two other teen-age boys. When he took a sharp turn at high speed, all three went overboard.

The passengers made it back to shore. Keyes didn't. None of the boys was wearing a life preserver.

"Every time we go into a boat to travel on the Kuskokwim or the

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Yukon, we are putting our lives on the line," Hunt said. "A lot of times there are sunken logs and snags and things like that we don't or cannot see."

"We think it's not going to happen to us or our family members or our children," he said.

Even when the accidents strike a family, the process of denial continues, Hunt said.

"Where a person drowns or dies from an accident, we forget that there is a lesson involved," he said. "We forget as soon as the person is buried. We forget, jump in our boat and leave — without a life preserver."

This year 17 persons drowned in the Y-K Delta. None of them were found wearing a life preserver.

Attitudes toward life preservers contribute to the problem, Hunt said. Going without a life preserver is considered "macho," and a person who wears one is considered a "chicken," he said.

Older adults must change those attitudes, Hunt said.

"We're the ones that usually come up with the rules and regulations. We're the enforcers. The elders are our guides," he said.

"We are the ones that set the example of how we should conduct ourselves. We are the ones that are going to have to make people, make each other aware, make our young people aware that it is very, very important that we use life preserver jackets."

Hunt believes people can get used to life preservers — just as they get used to wearing glasses or seat belts.

Sherron Smyth of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corp. in Bethel also compares life preservers with seat belts.

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"Just as seat belts save lives, float coats and life jackets can save lives on the river," she said. Just as the school saved lives by teaching hunter safety, so can they save lives by teaching water safety, Smyth said.

But to have an effective water safety program, schools need swimming pools, she said.

"Regionally, we could pull students in to learn swimming here," she said. "That's part of making an impact on the drowning deaths."

Recently, city officials held a public hearing on the feasibility of building a swimming pool in Bethel.

This year, alcohol was involved in more than half the 17 drowning deaths in the Delta. In fact, in the last 12 years, alcohol was involved in 85 of the 174 drowning deaths here.

One victim was Matthew Bean's son Alexander.

Alexander had personal problems,

in the Kuskokwim River, two miles east of Napaskiak by a boater heading toward Kwethluk.

"When a person takes sickness, we know it's leading to death. We can prepare for that. You take a sudden death like my experience last spring with my boy," Bean said. "To not see him, it's really great pain."

The memory of his 29-year-old son returned during the hunting season and during Thanksgiving.

"When I saw that first snow this fall, my son's great desire to go out hunting came back to me," Bean said. "We had our Thanksgiving dinner at the Senior Center and having that dinner without his son, there's a big celebration there. It really hurt me."

Bean expects similar feelings next spring.

"When we're having that anxiety to have that first boat ride, we'll have the same feeling, feeling of emptiness," he said. "It seems like that it keeps bringing back memories and the hurt that you have in the family. Not only me, but the whole family experiences that."

quit his job and went on a drinking binge, Bean said. A few days later, one of Alexander's friends saw him leaving with a bottle under his belt and then riding upriver at a high rate of speed, Bean said.

Alexander's body was found July 1