

Rising Water on the Toccoa

September 29, 2019

Sometimes, the way you plan to spend your day bears no relation to where you are really supposed to be that day. Best laid plans often end up in misadventures. We have a doozy of a misadventure from three TSRA-trained kayakers to share with you.

On Sunday, September 29, 2019, four Nashville-based American Canoe Association (ACA) certified L2 River Kayaking instructors gathered in Reliance, Tennessee at the Hiwassee River for a day of instructor training. Due to an unfortunate series of missed connections, the training did not come together. One instructor returned to Nashville to prepare for an international trip the next day, and the other three set out to run a river that was largely unfamiliar to them...and as a result, somehow ended up being in just the right place at just the right time to make a difference.



After reviewing dam release schedules and phoning a local outfitter, Michael King, Ellen Omohundro and Tom Christensen figured they could salvage some benefit from the trip to East Tennessee by heading to the Toccoa River 50 miles away on the Georgia border. It would be the first Toccoa River adventure for two of them, and the second for one. An online search for dam release and river rise schedules, river access locations and river mileage indicated this was a feasible trip. The paddlers set a new plan for 7.1 miles of kayaking from Curtis Switch TVA Park (Mineral Bluff, GA) to Toccoa River Park (McCaysville, GA) across the river from Copperhill, Tennessee, where the Toccoa becomes the Ocoee River.

Four miles into their journey, the group noticed a person in the distance near the center of a cold, rushing and still-rising Toccoa River. Something wasn't normal. As they neared, they saw a young girl without any flotation stranded in the middle of the river. She was sitting on a rock, gripping it tightly, in water above her waist. A group of adults on shore approximately 75 feet away were yelling and frantically moving around. It appeared the girl had been exploring the shallow river and the river level started rising from the dam release, impeding her return to shore.

Tom was the first to pass her, maneuvering to her right into an eddy slightly downstream river right. Ellen peeled off to river left toward the adults. Michael maneuvered his whitewater kayak into the eddy created by the rock and spoke with the stranded girl.

The girl had waded in the river the day before when the water was only ankle deep. When the family returned on Sunday, she waded out to the rock and was caught there when the water began to rise after the dam release. She did not know how to swim and was too scared to leave the rock as the water began to rise. The family was frantic, had no equipment and did not have skills to manage the strong current. The paddlers decided it was too risky to have the stranded wader hold the stern of a kayak without flotation or any swimming skills. The rising water would soon sweep the young girl off the rock, so a rescue was needed quickly.

The three paddlers each took a role. Ellen calmed the family, stopped them from entering the water and instructed them how to vector a rope to shore if they were given the signal to help. Then she took her kayak upstream and re-entered the river to be in an upstream position to reach the girl if necessary. Michael used his throw rope to tie off to a protruding tree, creating a cross-river safety line he could use to wade out into the current toward the girl. Tom was in the downstream catch position in case Mike's and Ellen's efforts were unsuccessful. By this time, the rising water had come up over the girl's rock and eliminated the eddy below. It was becoming increasingly difficult for the paddlers to maintain position in the strong current.

Michael began wading into the fast-flowing river. He came to the end of the rope 10 feet downstream from the girl on the rock. The water was rising and it would be only minutes before she was swept into the cold water. When Ellen came into view upstream, Michael directed the girl to swim to him. This was the moment of truth--she needed to push off and swim toward Michael at an angle without flotation or swimming skills. If she only slid off the rock into the water, she would still be beyond Michael's grasp, prompting a desperate attempt by Ellen and Tom to catch her in open water.

The young girl, perhaps appreciating her dilemma, attempted the best swimming stroke she could. With flailing arms and erratic kicks, she launched off the rock. Her movements were just enough to get her across the current and in reach of Michael's free arm. He then swung slowly downstream in the fast-moving water, one hand on the safety rope and one arm holding the girl to his side, and delivered the girl to her family waiting on shore. To say the family was appreciative is an understatement. Once the rescuers knew the girl was in good hands and being monitored for shock, they packed up and continued down river.



Rescuer Michael King with mom and daughter

The paddlers observed no other kayakers on the river that day. It is painful to dwell on the possibility that this young girl could have been swept off that rock into the fast, cold water with no rescuers in sight. Though it would be easy to armchair quarterback and examine the situation for possible mistakes, we are just happy our three trained paddlers were in the right place at the right time and that all ended well.

Michael's Point of View

We were there to enjoy the rising water from the dam release, but the girl was in jeopardy of losing her life. The parents and other adults were not equipped to perform a rescue and would have been swept away if they attempted one. We were in our safe zone, paddling whitewater kayaks while wearing helmets and personal flotation devices (PFDs).

I positioned the bow of my whitewater kayak upstream in a traditional eddy position less than three feet from the girl. I spoke with her briefly while assessing her condition and planning a rescue. I asked her: Are you injured? "No." Do you want to be rescued? "Yes." Are you with the adults by the river? "Yes." I smiled at her and told her she would be ok, and she smiled back. I inquired about a small amount of blood flowing from her hand in the clear river water. She indicated she had cut her finger earlier and it was ok.

I considered immediate connect and rescue options based upon my proximity. I could ask her to attempt to grab a handle on the stern of my kayak and tow her to shore, but that option was too risky without her wearing flotation. I considered removing my PFD and placing it on her, but that would endanger both of us.

Rescuing her from the stationary position on the rock mitigated more risks than a rescue with her leaving the rock and possibly being swept downstream in rapidly moving water. However, there was not a move in and save option that didn't compromise her current position. I've paddled hundreds of miles on a variety of rivers from Tennessee to Alaska with my 8-year-old son, beginning when he was nine months old. I'm no stranger to a passenger and a kayak balancing act. However, I was in a whitewater boat and this was not the typical rescue of another paddler.

Performing my job required strong critical thinking for analyzing problems, identifying and evaluating options and explaining choices based upon solid reasons and evidence. I had to quickly consider the options and develop a plan. Executing the plan required physical agility, balance, strength and determination.

I was equipped with a 75 foot rescue throw rope. The girl was approximately that distance from shore, so the rope represented the best first option for her rescue and survival. My plan was to tie off the rope, play out the rope from the throw bag while holding it for stability, stay on my feet, ford the river to her, connect and ford the river back to shore.

I made a quick ferrying maneuver across the river to river left where Ellen and the adults were located. Ellen was maneuvering her kayak up the bank and announced she would approach from upstream. I popped my skirt, exited my kayak, grabbed my throw rope, maneuvered around obstructions along the shore, jumped into the swift water and forced my way upstream through rushing water to a fallen tree with branches pointed downstream. The angle of the rope from the tree was not ideal, but was still our best option. I tied off the rope and used it to steady myself as I waded across the river with forceful water above my waist. If I lost my footing, I could be swept downstream. If I experienced a foot entrapment, I could become a victim. I was aware of the risks.

The river was rising and both of us were becoming more submerged. Forging the river and gripping the rope became increasingly difficult. It was challenging me to the point of considering other rescue options. I thought about the girl being within rope throw range, having enough rope and executing a traditional "throw the rope to the victim to grab it and pull

them in" rescue. Once again, it presented too much risk. I needed to keep moving and connect with her.

I forded the river to the end of my rope, approximately 10 feet downstream from the girl. I could not move farther upstream in the chest-high water. The water was to her shoulders. She turned upstream, and her face dipped in the water. Everyone was yelling "Swim!" I yelled, "Push toward me and swim!" If she pushed in the right direction, I knew I could catch her. She pushed and swam and I caught her. Holding her created more resistance in the rushing water, and it was time to make a pendulum maneuver to shore at the end of the 75 foot rope, maintaining stability on my feet. I encouraged her to hold onto me with both hands as I held her in my left arm and held the rope with my right hand.

Approximately halfway through the maneuver, Ellen appeared above us. She was positioned to move in from above and Tom was positioned to move in from below if necessary. At approximately five feet from shore, with water to my shoulders, my feet were no longer on the bottom of the river. I spun around to direct the girl to the base of the tree at the shore, telling her to grab it. Her dad and others were there to receive her. Ellen was positioned on the other side of the tree. I immediately told the young girl that she was very brave. The family helped determine she was safe and uninjured.

Her father and mother expressed tremendous gratitude, invited us to stay, said they would like to host at their home, shared their phone number, requested photos and we exchanged subsequent communications. We plan to rendezvous in the future.

Ellen's Point of View

When we arrived, about 10 family members were on river right, while the girl was mid-river. Her mother and father were hysterical and in tears. Some of the adults reached out toward her in vain with bamboo sticks no more than six feet long because that was all they had. The extended family were yelling at me to help her.

I quickly found out no one had a life jacket and none of them knew how to swim. I focused on crowd control and keeping other people from jumping in the water and making the situation worse. And I gave them something to do, showing them how to vector the rope to shore if Michael signaled.

I've heard stories of hysterical family members but never really understood it until yesterday, and I never imagined I would be the calm voice of reason. The father grabbed me by the arm and said, "Please don't let my daughter die." That will stick with me for a while.

The whole time I was thinking of what Jack Lyle and Craig Burr told me more than once, "First be calm and you will see what to do." Sure enough, the answer appeared. All of that training from Woody, Charlie and so many others kicked in.

Tom's Point of View

As I paddled to stay in the eddy near the young girl on the rock, I could see the anxious fear in her eyes that were pleading for help. I instinctively touched the serrated rescue knife tucked into my rescue PFD, a second rescue knife I have carried with me ever since another river rescue 45 years ago.

I had seen the same look in another young girl's eyes as she looked to me and my two paddle mates to save her life in a desperate situation on a fast moving river. I was a young wilderness guide conducting a river canoe trip for teens in Austin, Texas. A girl's canoe tipped over and wrapped around a downed tree, the force of the river pinning her leg between the canoe gunnel and the tree. As my assistant guide and I struggled to free her, the water was rising toward her mouth and nose. My assistant reached into his shorts and pulled out a very big Swiss Army knife and extended a serrated blade from it. He then proceeded to cut the aluminum gunnel and thwart away, which allowed us to bend the plastic canoe enough to free the girl as the river reached her lips. Later the assistant said to me, "Lugged this big knife around a lot over the years. First time to use it was a good one!"

As the three of us readied to launch on the Toccoa and I was loading my big rope, I asked Michael if he had a throw rope. "Yes," he said. "I've been lugging this big rope around forever, but will take it along." I trust he will now carry the big throw rope with him the rest of his paddling days. I know I still have my big rope and my serrated knife.