



By Dan Groebner, Navajo County Search and Rescue

It was their first visit to the wet, cool, and shaded creek. A great place to escape the heat of the Phoenix valley to celebrate a family member's birthday and spend time with relatives from across Arizona. The area offered plunge pools to soak in and flat, smooth bedrock to relax on. Gently cascading water tumbling down exposed slab rock making up the Mogollon Rim added some natural background music. Dozens of people were here to soak up the speckled sunlight filtering through the cottonwoods and scattered pines.

Within seconds, 10 members of an extended family were killed in a flash flood that gave no warning and spared no one in its direct path. A distant thunderstorm, impossible to see from the Water Wheel and Cold Spring recreation area, deposited heavy rain over much of the burned and exposed scar left by the Highline Fire more than eight miles to the northeast, creating a tidal wave of water, ash, logs and rocks that coursed down Ellison Creek. After joining the East Verde River, the flood entered narrow canyons where it scoured the slab rocks and remained hidden until the last second behind sharp bends in the canyon or the abrupt drops of waterfalls and steep rapids. Although the area may have been vulnerable to a flash flood, nobody expected anything of this magnitude in such a small wooded stream.

Most of the victims were found within 24 hours by the Gila County Sheriff's office, Tonto National Forest, and the Tonto Rim Search and Rescue. To assist in locating the last victim, additional search and rescue teams were called in from around the state, including the local Navajo County Search and Rescue (NCSAR) Sheriff's posse led by Sargent Scott Badger and Team Captain Laurie Palazzolo. Debra Jones, K-9 handler and NCSAR Secretary, along with her trained search dogs Snap and Puff, and supported by K-9 team member Connie Wilkins, were instrumental in clearing brush piles and deep pools using the dogs' keen sense of smell. Roger Schutt, NCSAR tracker and "ground-pounder",

pulled apart debris piles if the dogs showed any signs of interest.

Once the NCSAR team was staged and briefed, it was NCSAR Executive Officer Jenifer Johnson who was the first to notice the younger women and man walking within the search area along the East Verde River. They were obviously wet, tired and thirsty so Johnson offered them water from her pack and asked what they were doing in the closed search area. It turned out we were talking to the surviving members of the victims family who couldn't sleep that morning and began searching the river banks just after sunrise, miles downstream from our current location. Our NCSAR search team was preparing to search the area where incident command leadership felt the last victim would be found, but the family members had to be told they couldn't help because of further flooding risk and complications they might cause the search dogs. Since there were no other search personnel available to stay with the family, I volunteered to stay back at the staging area to help explain to the family members what we were doing to find their relative.

In river searches like this, the search area is partitioned into divisions along the length of the river, where search teams then start at the outer boundaries of each division and work towards each other. Dive teams with scuba gear were sent to the deepest pools, and the dog teams were distributed evenly through the divisions. State fire fighting crews from the female Perryville State Prison used power tools and hand saws to carefully search through debris piles.

Family members studied a map of the search area, and the last victim's father pointed to a pool where he was sure we would find his son. I didn't feel totally prepared for this situation, as our training usually involved tracking lost subjects and providing first aid to survivors. To make sure I didn't say anything wrong making things worse, I just listened to their heart breaking stories about the event that will change their family forever. One theme dominated all of their stories. Their family's wish was that this same tragedy not happen to anybody else. They just kept asking how this could be avoided and what could they do. I didn't have any answers for them at the time but hopefully this article creates a little more awareness of flash floods throughout the White Mountains. In addition, you can refer to Liesl Hall's article on page 21 for more great information to keep safe in your outdoor activities. After five days of searching, the last victim was found downstream, allowing the family to bury him with the rest of his family that also perished.

Many people in the White Mountains have told me they couldn't understand how this could happen to so many people. Many of our streams have relatively long sight distances so seeing the approaching flash flood in time to get away is not a problem. However, we also have areas where canyons box in tight so if rain is forecast in the area, always try to minimize your time spent in areas where you don't have escape routes at right angles or perpendicular to the direction of flow. That is the best way to avoid a flash flood as you can never out run it downstream, so head to the sides of the drainage immediately if you hear a roar or feel ground vibrations. Obviously, flash floods are more common in rocky canyons or recently burned and denuded forested areas. But don't let your guard down in the White Mountains during the monsoon season or spring runoff as a stationary thunderstorm can saturate the soils quickly, sending all that moisture downstream as if it is coming off of someone's paved driveway.

Since many of us will hike and recreate all over Arizona, keep in mind that small, but powerful storms just over the horizon can create deadly flash floods at any moment. The risk is manageable though, if you avoid narrow canyons, camp on higher ground, keep an eye on the youngsters, and always be aware of your surroundings. Please try to make one family's wish come true, so that no one else has to

go through what they did.

This article is dedicated to the victims of the July 15, 2017 Water Wheel flash flood:

Hector Miguel Garnica, 27; Maria Raya-Garcia, 27; Emily Garnica, 3; Mia Garnica, 5; Daniel Garnica, 7; Maribel Raya-Garcia, 24; Erica Raya-Garcia, 2; Javier Raya-Garcia, 19; Selia Garcia Castenada, 57; Jonathan Leon, 13;