Water recovery experts find missing kayaker’s body near Emerald Bay, boy in Stampede Reservoir

Bruce’s Legacy is helping families locate their loved ones who have drowned. Photo/Bruce’s Legacy

By Kathryn Reed

Being in the business of recovering dead bodies is stressful and rewarding.

The past few days have been extremely satisfying for Keith Cormican and his girlfriend Beth Darst.

On Saturday they recovered the body of Pham Dan Vu Thanh just north of Emerald Bay. He had gone kayaking by himself on June 8 from D.L. Bliss State Park and was never heard from again.

Two days earlier they found the body of a Carson City boy who had drowned near Truckee.

Cormican, through his **nonprofit Bruce's Legacy**, travels the United States with his 22-foot Hewescraft boat in search of people who are presumed to have drowned. His equipment is top of the line, but could be bought by any agency. And some have. But not all know how to use the sonar or have the manpower to scour a waterbody for the missing individual.

Cormican takes the time. He knows what it's like to have a loved one who never surfaced.

"Bruce's Legacy is in memory of my brother. He was a firefighter in our hometown in Wisconsin. He passed away in a recovery operation in a drowning back in 1995," Cormican told *Lake Tahoe News.* "I've been involved with public safety diving for 25 years. I've seen the need for specialized equipment."

Cormican started the nonprofit about four years ago. Mostly it is he and his girlfriend who are doing the work, sometimes with volunteers at the location.

"The El Dorado County sheriff's detectives have just been fabulous to work with. You don't always get that," Cormican said. "They are a big reason we were so successful. Their cadaver dogs need to be credited as well."

The dogs had pinged on a location near where Thanh's body was found. That was critical because there had been no witnesses to whatever went wrong that day.

Thanh's body was in 245 feet of water, more than 100 yards from shore, just north of Emerald Bay.

Keith Cormican and Beth Darst

Cormican and Darst are also the duo who found the body of UNR football player Marc Ma in July, about one year after he went missing on the West Shore.

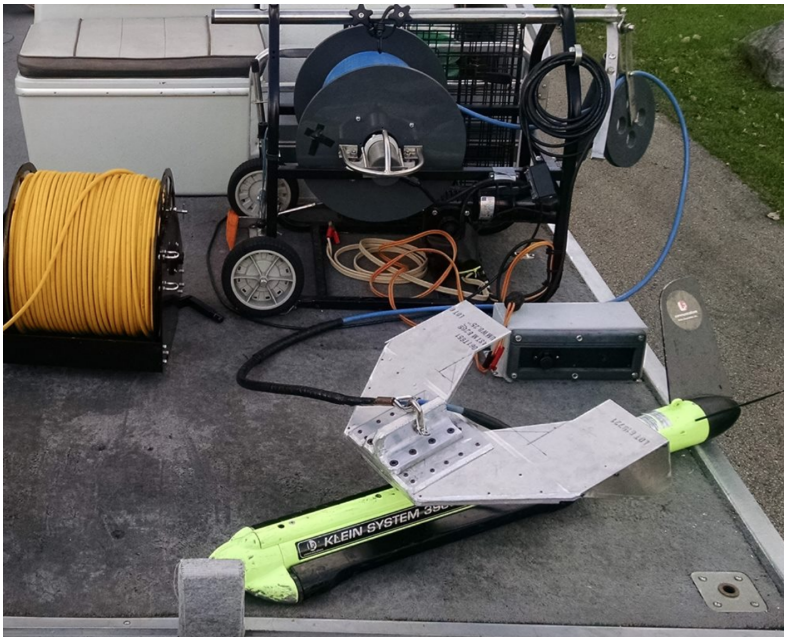
On Aug. 23-24 the rescue team was at Stampede Reservoir near Truckee looking for 11-year-old Markos Vasquez of Carson City. He had been with a friend when their canoe capsized July 10. Neither was wearing a life jacket. The 14-year-old was pulled to safety, but his younger friend was not so lucky.

Not every mission is successful. The Aug. 26 recovery of Thanh’s body was the 19th for the Wisconsin duo.

It’s a labor of love, not something the couple make money from. They ask for their travel expenses to be paid for, like gas and lodging. The rest of their expenses are covered by donations.

After the Ma recovery their phone has been ringing more frequently. They can’t go everywhere. The next operation will be somewhere in California. They have multiple options.

But today, well, it’s a day off. They will be back out on their boat, only this time to enjoy Lake Tahoe.



Tools of the trade aboard the recovery boat. Photo/Bruce’s Legacy

They have come to appreciate Lake Tahoe.

Working on it, though, is a challenge.

“This area is so brutal. It drops off so horribly fast. There are boulders as big as a house down there,” Cormican said. “There are so many places they can fall and you cannot see them.”

They used a grid search based on the cadaver dog ping. They started at 7am Aug. 26. At 5pm Thanh’s body was located.

The one good thing about Lake Tahoe is the clarity. They were able to use an underwater camera to find the body.

Long days are the norm. Rivers are hardest. There is no exact time that they work a body of water. It’s a matter of going back and forth, and then having to call it quits.

“It’s horribly tough to tell someone’s family you can’t find them. That is the hardest thing we do,” Cormican said.

But this past week it was elation, of sorts. Recovery is a bittersweet ending. It means a proper burial, no wondering

what really happened and the proverbial closure.

“It’s extremely rewarding to bring these family member home when they’ve been told there is nothing else they can do,” Cormican said.