

After son drowned, mom on mission to stop people swimming in quarries

More information

► For more information on the Stay Out — Stay Alive program, email AskMSHA@dol.gov.

► To report problems at abandoned mine locations, call the MSHA Hotline at: 1-800-746-1553.

Matt Gray For South Jersey Times

Sally Yabra is on a mission. ■ When her son drowned in a Pennsylvania quarry on Aug. 17, 2015, Yabra knew she had to do something — anything — to save others from a similar fate. ■ She didn't know her 19-year-old son, Jonathan M. Baksh, had gone with friends to the popular swimming spot in Lower Mount Bethel Township. ■ The quarry is on property owned by Eastern Industries, Inc. The site is dotted with "no trespassing" signs. ■ Friends told her that her son screamed for help before disappearing under the water.

"You can't imagine the emotions I was going through," Yabra said. "My world stopped. I didn't know how to deal with it."

She drove to Easton, Pa., to see her son and ensure that his last wishes were carried out. Jonathan was an organ donor. "They took all that they needed from him," she said.

But she knew that her son had one more gift to give — a valuable lesson.



Jonathan Marcel Baksh

born: 11/12/95 passed: 08/17/15



QUARRY WATERS ARE DANGEROUS & DEADLY STAY OUT STAY ALIVE

Jonathan M. Baksh, 19, of Edison, drowned while swimming at a quarry in Pennsylvania in August 2015. His mother, Sally Yabra, posted copied of this sign around the quarry, warning others of the dangers of swimming in the abandoned mining pit.
Photo provided by Sally Yabra

QUARRIES CAN KILL

While they look inviting from the surface, abandoned sand and gravel mining pits filled with water are deceptive.

You might step from the shoreline and quickly reach a ledge that drops off a hundred feet. The water can be very cold, leading to muscle cramps, and strong currents can take even an experienced swimmer by surprise.

South Jersey has seen several quarry drownings, including one this summer and another last summer, both in Gloucester County.

SEE QUARRY, A5

QUARRY

FROM A1

The pits may contain abandoned machinery, vehicles and other debris that can injure or trap swimmers and divers.

Since these pits are often in remote locations with limited vehicle access, getting help to the scene can be difficult, too.

For all these reasons, Yabra has launched a Change.org petition asking President Barack Obama to mandate education about these dangers. She wants to see an existing federal program, created years ago to teach kids about abandoned mine dangers, funded and implemented nationwide.

'STAY OUT — STAY ALIVE'

The U.S. Department of Labor's Mine Safety & Health Administration has tried to spread the message about safety.

"It's not part of our actual mandate," explained agency spokeswoman Amy Louviere. "This is something we took on because we were hearing about a lot of cases of children and even adults going on abandoned mine properties."

In some cases, they were hurt or killed swimming in mine pits, riding ATVs on mining properties or exploring underground shafts.

In 1999, the administration launched its "Stay Out — Stay Alive" national awareness campaign to teach about the dangers on these properties. That effort included fact sheets, videos and stickers for kids. Officials also partner with state mining associations.

The federal agency is responsible for safety of functioning mines, and its official role ends when those facilities close.

All the same, mine inspectors often go to schools or visit with scouting groups and others to talk about this issue, Louviere said.

With no funding to carry out a sustained nationwide education campaign, though, these efforts are limited to requests for officials to come and speak with young people.

Mine owners are responsible for closing off the sites and posting signs, but keeping people out of these areas

can be very tough, Louviere noted.

"I think it's hard for local law enforcement to always keep on top of it," she said. "I think the owners of these properties, by and large, do what they can to keep trespassers out.

"If someone wants to get in, they will find a way."

LAX ENFORCEMENT

After her son's death, Yabra and her family returned to the quarry to throw flowers in the water in remembrance of Jonathan. While there, they saw swimmers carrying on as if nothing had happened.

Two months earlier, another New Jersey man, 22-year-old Jeremias Guzman, of Ridgefield, drowned while swimming at the same quarry.

Yabra criticized Pennsylvania for lax enforcement of closed mines. "What are their guidelines? Who is checking on these abandoned sites?" she asked.

She wants stronger deterrents in place, including fences and signs that make the dangers very clear.

The owners of the quarry where her son drowned agreed to let Yabra place signs with information about her son, she said, along with a photograph of his beaming smile. The idea was to put a face on the danger of swimming in these spots.

"I want to make sure that when they see the sign, they understand that this is a quarry and that it is a dangerous place," she said.

All young people see at a quarry site is blue water and a free place to cool off, Yabra said. A "no trespassing" sign won't stop them.

"Right now, there is no education at all in the schools. I want that program implemented. I reached out to my congressmen and none of them have ever returned my phone calls."

Yabra said she is working with officials in Edison to promote the education in local schools.

"Maybe I can stop one child from going in," she said.

Meanwhile, in the midst of another hot summer, the drownings continue.

Just last month, Andrew Grennan, 20, of Monmouth County, drowned while swimming in a slate quarry

in Bangor, Pa.

In response to her son's death and others, police have issued \$300 citations to swimmers at the Pennsylvania quarry, Yabra said, but she doesn't see that as the answer. The swimmers now have a violation on their record, but they haven't really learned anything.

"You're not educating them," she said. "You need to reach out to the children and the parents. They have to understand what they are doing."

LEARNING FROM TRAGEDY

While Yabra says federal elected officials haven't responded to her, she has found an ally in the United Kingdom, where she says education about the dangers of abandoned mines is a big deal.

She spoke with representatives of a mining company in Northern Ireland.

The London-based Mineral Products Association maintains a robust public education campaign that includes a Facebook presence, videos and even an online mine safety game for kids. The object of the game is to save mine trespassers as they get in various sorts of trouble on a mine site.

Another mom who lost her son in a quarry shares Yabra's views about the importance of education on this issue.

"A 'no trespassing' sign is not telling a 17-year-old that you could lose your life in there," said Linda Williams, who lost her son, Darius Boyer in a drowning accident last summer at a quarry in Monroe Township, Gloucester County.

This education campaign must reach parents, too, Williams said. "A lot of them don't know that kids go there," she said. "I wouldn't want another parent to ever go through what I'm going through.

"We've got to do something. We can't just let it keep happening. The schools need to be aware and parents need to be aware."

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