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Some sensed trouble before Pella drownings

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A day after two Kansas City boys drowned at the Pella Aquatic Center, a witness told police he saw a teenage boy moving "in a struggling, bobbing manner in the deep end."

The teen "stuck his head above water to breathe and then went below the water's surface," the 12-year-old witness from Illinois, who was attending a Fellowship of Christian Athletes camp, told police. The witness said he saw the teen, whom he identified as a "basketball player," struggling 45 to 60 minutes before the two boys' bodies were pulled from the bottom of the pool on July 14.

Police reports and witness statements obtained by The Des Moines Register reveal several people saw, felt or heard something that, if acted upon, might have saved Gael Chrispin, 14, and Nehmson Sanon, 15. Notes from the 33 interviews by police with lifeguards, Fellowship of Christian Athletes staffers and campers also reinforced how poor visibility was in the deep end of the pool.

The reports present the first detailed look at what happened the night of the drownings. Neither police nor officials at the city-owned pool have made any public comment about the boys' deaths.

Sanon and Chrispin were attending the FCA camp in Pella and visited the pool with 175 other boys. Chrispin, who had moved from Haiti to Kansas City this year, wanted to get better at basketball, said his pastor in Kansas City, John Mark Clifton. Sanon played football. Neither boy knew how to swim.

Before Sanon and Chrispin went down the drop slide at the deep end of the pool, they and other campers spent some time playing "king of the hill" on a

float in the shallow end, witness statements indicate.

A camp leader told police that at one point during the evening, he saw Sanon standing near the deep end and talking to other campers, who asked him why he wasn't wet. Sanon told them he couldn't swim well; the camp leader told police that he told Sanon he shouldn't be near 13 feet of water.

Sanon and Chrispin got in line to go down the drop slide between 8:30 and 8:45 p.m., according to witness statements.

A lifeguard told police she heard Chrispin tell Sanon he was afraid to go down the slide first. Sanon took the lead.

"I'm scared, too, but I'll go down," the lifeguard told police she heard Sanon say.

Sanon pushed himself into the slide and dropped into the water. Chrispin quickly followed, which was unsafe, the lifeguard said.

Chrispin was warned several times not to go down the slide, but he may not have understood, the lifeguard told police. Chrispin did not speak English well, Clifton said.

The confusion at the top of the slide mattered because the lifeguard had no chance to make sure Sanon had swum safely away before Chrispin went down, Pella Police Lt. David Beukelman wrote in his investigative report.

The lifeguard didn't see the two boys in the landing zone but thought they had swum away, Beukelman wrote. The lifeguard sent the next boy down the slide.

The lifeguard told police she could not see the bottom of the pool from the top of the slide. The pool was murky that night because many swimmers had visited the pool that day and suntan lotion and dirt had clouded the water, she said. She also thought the lights were less bright than normal.

Another lifeguard who was watching the deep end when Sanon and Chrispin used the slide told police he saw nothing unusual.

However, the 12-year-old witness who told police he saw Chrispin struggling said the boy didn't resurface after going underwater. The witness told police he "saw a form of a person's body about 3 feet under the water's surface."

The witness told his mother, who was there taking pictures, that someone was

in trouble.

The mother, Elizabeth Green of Prophetstown, Ill., "looked towards the lifeguard and he did not portray a distressed look," Beukelman wrote in his report. "She figured everything was fine."

Green told police she didn't remember seeing a black male go down the slide. She also said she couldn't see more than 3 feet beneath the surface of the water. She told police she looked at the pool when her son said someone was in trouble, but she didn't see anyone.

Reached by phone on Saturday, Green said that she had been told not to comment and hung up.

Based on witness statements, Chrispin and Sanon could have been 13 feet underwater up to an hour before they were discovered, while other campers slid, dived and did back flips into the water above them.

One witness said he heard other boys say they felt something grab their ankles from below in the deep end. He turned and "looked into the deep end's middle area, and saw an odd, dark shape in the water," Beukelman wrote. "He estimates the shape was approximately 6-7 feet below the water's surface and then slowly saw it fade away or sink."

The witness told police he decided the shape was nothing.

Whistles blew to empty the pool about 9:30 p.m. Soon after, a supervising lifeguard turned off the overhead lights, and lifeguards gathered in the guard room before heading home, according to the police reports.

When Chrispin and Sanon didn't show up on the bus to go back to Central College, the site of the camp, FCA leaders told lifeguards they were missing.

One lifeguard put on goggles and dived into the deep end but couldn't see anything in the cloudy water, Beukelman wrote in his report. A second lifeguard went into the water. He "surfaced relatively quickly" and said the boys were down in the pool, Beukelman wrote.

A third lifeguard dived in. "The water was so cloudy that (he) could only see them when he was within 3 feet of them," Beukelman wrote.

When Beukelman arrived about 9:50 p.m., the two boys were lying on their backs next to the pool, and lifeguards were performing cardiopulmonary

resuscitation. He tried to use a defibrillator that lifeguards had grabbed on one of the boys, but there was not enough heart activity for a shock, the report said.

Ambulances arrived and rushed the boys to Pella's hospital, where they were pronounced dead.

Underwater lights in the pool had been shut off for nearly six years while the city sued the contractor that had installed them. Aquatics supervisor Jan Bensink testified in July that the city had not installed additional lights or hired more lifeguards.

The city won the lawsuit.

Three lifeguards who worked shifts at the slide and the deep end over the 45 minutes on July 14 before the pool closed told police they either couldn't see to the bottom of the pool or couldn't remember whether the bottom of the pool was visible.

The lifeguard who blew the whistle to close the deep end at 9:30 p.m. said she "scanned the deep end one last time, as far as she could see, to ensure nobody was still swimming," Beukelman wrote.

The Register reported in July that lighting at the Pella pool fell short of state requirements after the underwater lights stopped working.

At least half of the pool's deep-end lighting does not meet state requirements, including the area where the boys' bodies were found.

The pool reopened on July 28.