

The Codington County Search & Rescue Team

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The Codington County Search and Rescue Team is well-known around the region as a top-notch, welltrained and well-equipped squad, ready to respond to emergencies in the county and well beyond.

That envious level of professionalism and expertise didn't happen overnight. The group formed in the early 1990s after a couple of drownings in the area, the first when a vehicle carrying 34-year-old Tracy Lowrie fell through a hole in the ice on Lake Kampeska and then, seven months later, when a trucker from Winnipeg, Manitoba, lost control of his semi and ended

up in a stock dam along I-29 in Grant County.

Jay Grandprey was a recreational diver who worked for the Watertown Parks and Recreation Department at the time, and he used his skills to help recover the victims.

Pat Culhane, who at the time was a Watertown resident and member of the South Dakota Highway Patrol, remembered clearly seeing the need for a professional dive and rescue team.

“I told him back then, you're going down there, you have no backup, you have no rope, you have no safety. It didn't seem right. He agreed. He was very uncomfortable doing it.

“From that point on, he and I became fast friends and we started the process of beginning a dive team.” That process began in February 1993. The next month, Grandprey – along

with Dave Wicks and Ken Shay, gave a water safety orientation to the Watertown Police Department, Fire Department, the local Game, Fish and Parks Department, the Codington County Sheriffs' Department and the S.D. Highway Patrol. In April 1993, Culhane and Grandprey presented a proposal to local officials for forming a dive rescue team and the proposal was accepted.

In May 1993, the first organizational meeting was held to create the dive rescue team. Back then, flooding was a big problem in the area, and it has continued to this day, especially north of Watertown, and Culhane and Grandprey knew the problem wasn't going to go away.

The first organization to step forward to help the process of starting a dive rescue team was the Watertown Community

Foundation, which awarded the fledgling group a \$7,200 grant to purchase dry suits for the team members.

Culhane, who now splits his time between Arizona and the Missouri River near Gettysburg, said the Foundation's early support was crucial.

"The Community Foundation is probably one of the sole reasons Search and Rescue exists in its format today," he said. "When we started, we had an old blue Chevy Blazer that had belonged to the Sheriff's Office and then the United Way bought us an inflatable boat, which they still have. But to see what exists today, you would be overwhelmed."

The WACF's total contribution to the search and rescue team now stands at \$134,372. The biggest single contribution

from the Foundation came in 2011 \$250,000 emergency response vehicle. That year the Foundation also supplied the team with 10 handheld GPS (Global Positioning Satellite) units.

The early support from the WACF helped the team establish itself as a competent group, which enabled it to develop other sources of revenue. Now, the team is funded by both Codington County and the City of Watertown.

The Search and Rescue Team is now under the Codington County Emergency Management Department. Director Jim Sutton said the group now raises much of its own money to support the team, comprised of an all-volunteer force of around 30 to 35 people. "Now we generate equipment money through our own efforts," Sutton

said.. "We don't have to come back to the Foundation year after year like we previously did. Now we have the sportsmen's raffle, which Pat (Culhane) got started 16 years ago."

But all of those efforts are now possible because of the Foundation's past support.

"The Foundation was so loving and caring and willing, along with the board and its director, to consider our applications," Culhane said. "At the time, when there was a need for a particular piece of equipment – whether it was pagers, a vehicle, dry suits, whatever – they were there for us. It's safe to say, in my opinion, Search and Rescue would be a lot less if it weren't for the Watertown Area Community Foundation."



Pat Culhane