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Seminarian missing in river helped struggling woman before disappearing

By Stan Finger and Matt Riedl

THE WICHITA EAGLE

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Riedl/The Wichita Eagle) BY MCCLATCHY



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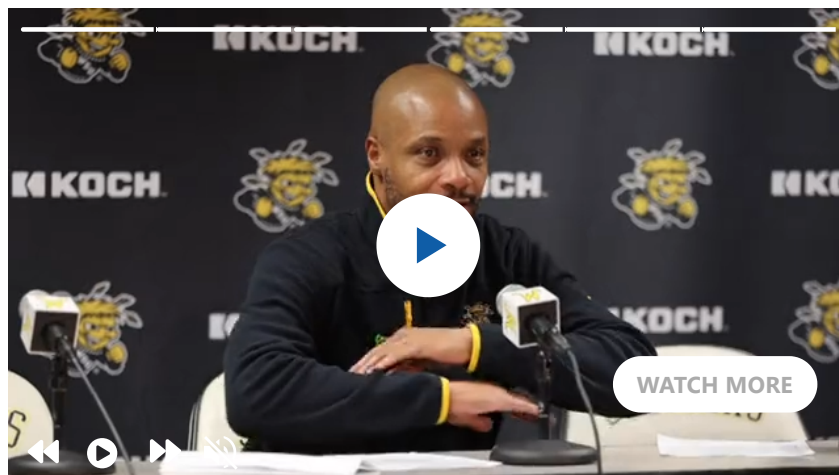
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A man whom rescuers spent all day Saturday trying to find in the Arkansas River helped a struggling woman out of the water before going under, according to the Wichita Fire Department.

The man has been identified as Brian Bergkamp, 24, a native of Garden Plain who was scheduled to enter his third year of theology study at Mount St. Mary's Seminary in Emmitsburg, Md., this fall.

Firefighters decided around 7 p.m. to suspend the search for Bergkamp until early Sunday morning.

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A Sedgwick County emergency dispatch supervisor said the submersion was reported at 8:40 a.m. Saturday. Swollen by recent rains, the river's current was moving at between 5 and 8 knots, according to Wichita Fire Battalion Chief Frank Buck. That's up to 9 mph.

"That adds a lot of pressure when you're in the water," Buck said. "It could pin you up against a tree or a branch, any kind of obstruction."

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that snared the kayaks, Buck said.



Five kayakers got caught up in churning waters on Arkansas River on Saturday morning. Four made it to shore, but firefighters are searching for the fifth, a man in his 20s. BY MCCLATCHY

One of the women fell into the swirling water underneath the bridge, Buck said, and Bergkamp left his kayak to assist her.

In the process of helping her, he “started having trouble himself,” Buck said.

“They got caught up in that, and that’s what got him in trouble,” Buck said. “He ended up saving her life; unfortunately, we haven’t found him.”

All of the kayakers had to swim to shore, Buck said.

Three of the kayakers were able to get their crafts to shore on the west bank of the river; the other two kayaks were found tangled in brush about a quarter-mile downstream, according to Buck.

An e-mail sent to parishioners at Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church said the second man was also a seminarian. Buck said the second man and all three women were wearing life jackets; Bergkamp was not.

“Our focus at this time is finding Brian and providing support to his family,” the Rev. Mike Simone, director of vocations for the Catholic Diocese of Wichita, said in a statement released by the diocese. “We would be most grateful for prayers for them.”

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to no avail. Multiple boats were deployed to search both shorelines. The east bank of the river near 21st Street is thick with brush.

“We’ve searched (around the 21st Street Bridge), but we can’t give 100 percent (clear), because we’re not putting scuba divers in,” Buck said.

“We’re just probing it, trying to find him. He could still be in the spillway, or he could have got washed downriver.”

A Kansas Highway Patrol plane was deployed in the morning to assist with the search.

A Catholic priest and nun both visited the site Saturday afternoon.

In his seminarian biography posted on the diocese’s website, Bergkamp wrote: “I want to say I first heard the call when I was really young, like 8 years young.

“I don’t know though if I would quite consider this a calling or just my first time I had the desire to become a priest. I remember in 2nd grade, my close friend and I would argue back and forth on who would be a priest first. And as time would tell, it looks like we will both be priests at the same time, for we are now both entering the seminary.”

Buck called Bergkamp’s decision to assist the woman in distress a courageous act.

“It took a lot of courage; unfortunately, it took a lot of energy, too,” he said. “It might have taxed him so much that he couldn’t get out himself.”

Fire crews are expected to resume their search at around 8 a.m. Sunday.





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