

LOCAL & STATE



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After shark attack, calm

Ocean Isle vacationer made 911 call as teen victim left the surf

By Adam Wagner

Adam.Wagner@StarNewsOnline.com

OCEAN ISLE BEACH | When Melanie and Marissa Stephens heard the first sirens Thursday, they joked aloud that a shark had probably eaten someone.

"No, someone probably had a heart attack," said Brian Stephens, their dad.

The sisters were closer to correct: A 13-year-old had been bitten by a shark, suffering lacerations to her foot.

The family didn't know that

Keshia Stephens, Brian's sister, had seen the girl stagger out of the water with a bloody foot and called 911. Or that the 13-year-old girl was the same one Melanie, 11, and Marissa, 8, were playing beside less than an hour earlier.

Calling 911

Keshia Stephens doesn't usually take her phone near the ocean, leaving

it under the watchful eye of either her brother or her sister-in-law and safe from the water.

When Brian and Sandy Ste-



Marissa Stephens



Melanie Stephens



Families visit the beach strand Friday at the Monroe Street access on Ocean Isle Beach. On Thursday, an unidentified 13-year-old was reportedly attacked by a shark nearby. Photo by Adam Wagner

phens took their kids to grab lunch and take naps early Thursday, though, Keshia grabbed her phone.

"That was the first time I took

my phone to the water yesterday," Keshia said. "I took it down to have some music to listen

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to.”

Keshia was lounging in the ankle-deep water – the same spot she would be in almost exactly 24 hours later – when she saw the girl her nieces had been playing with shortly before walk out of the water. The girl wasn't carrying the boogie board she had been riding a short time before, Keshia said.

Her ankle bloodied, the girl went to where her family was set up nearby and sat down, Keshia said. She didn't scream or yell and appeared to be in shock.

Keshia, who happened to have her phone in hand, called 911. In the call, she can be heard figuring out that she's by Monroe Street, telling the dispatcher that the girl had been bitten on the right foot and that people were trying to find water for the girl.

The dispatcher tells Keshia how to dress the wound and to “tell them not to lift it up to look” at the wound.

In the day since the incident, Keshia has listened to the 911 call, which has been posted across the Internet by multiple media outlets, including this one.

“I sounded really calm, but I was not calm at all,” she said. “I think it's because I was trying to listen to her and do what she said.”

The girl's boogie board showed up shortly later. Keshia said Friday that it must have washed ashore, one chunk taken out of either side.

The Stephens family, on vacation from Kannapolis, was back at Ocean Isle Beach on Friday – Keshia wear-

ing a bikini and a beach hat, and again lounging in the water just enough that she could know it was wet, and Melanie and Marissa lying in the shade of an umbrella, their hair still stringy from dips in the ocean, their parents and toddler sister nearby.

‘I wouldn't go out there by myself’

When the Stephens family returned to the beach Thursday and learned that, lo and behold, Melanie and Marissa were right about the ambulance sirens, the young girls were briefly shaken up.

“When we came back, they wouldn't really go back in the water. They only got in ankle deep, but today they went back in,” said Sandy Stephens, the girls' mother.

While the girls returned to the Atlantic, they were apprehensive.

“I kind of feel scared because I was out there yesterday with her, she was right beside us,” Melanie said.

“I wouldn't go out there by myself,” Marissa said, her dad's damp hair and glistening back confirming that she hadn't.

How often sharks attack

Confirmed unprovoked shark attacks ticked downward in 2014, from 75 to 72 worldwide, according to the International Shark Attack File.

While that number is the lowest since 2009, the 2014 Worldwide Shark Attack Summary said that unprovoked shark attacks have generally increased since 1900 as humans spend more time in the sea.

Shark attacks are still significant-

SHARK PINGS

A large shark being tracked by OCEARCH, a nonprofit marine animal research organization, made her presence known in the Cape Fear region this week. The GPS-tagged shark also is keeping the world informed of her whereabouts via the social media site Twitter.

Chessie: The 12-foot-long, 1,200-pound tiger shark pinged at 5:10 p.m. Friday off the coast of Figure Eight Island. Her Twitter handle is @chessieshark.

For more information about the tracking program, visit ocearch.org.

ly less common than, for instance, boating accidents. From 1998 to 2013, there were 2,548 boating accidents and 433 boating fatalities in North Carolina, according to the U.S. Coast Guard. The state had 35 shark attacks and one shark-related fatality over that same period, according to the shark file.

That fatal attack, which happened in Dare County in 2001, was North Carolina's last. Neither New Hanover or Brunswick county has had a fatal attack since record keeping began in 1935.

New Hanover had the most attacks from the state between 1935 and 2014, with 13, according to the file. Brunswick had nine of North Carolina's 52 confirmed attacks in that same period, according to the file.

“It happened yesterday, it's not gonna happen again today,” said Rick Patterson, an Ocean Isle Beach resident who was on the strand Friday with his daughters.

‘It's a wonderful place’

Standing at the Monroe beach access Friday, a visitor could see teen-

agers playing beach volleyball, a group of vacationing mothers trying to get their summers' first tans and children standing at the water's edge trying to determine the best approach to the choppy surf.

Kelly Hill of Oakboro had just arrived at Ocean Isle Beach with two friends. She was enjoying the 90-degree weather and breeze and when asked if she was worried about going into the ocean, said she wasn't concerned.

“If my kids were here, maybe we'd be out in the water a whole lot more,” she said. “But they aren't.”

Some kids were in the water. And they were also unconcerned.

Tatum Sobota, 15, of Kernersville was on the first day of her annual summer visit with her grandmother Judy Sobota. Tatum, her brother and their cousin were more frustrated that the rough ocean was keeping them from making full use of their nearby surfboards than they were about any marine animals attacking them.

“There's no reason to be nervous. They're always out there,” Tatum said, adding that nobody should be afraid of the ocean.

Parker Sobota, 12, was just coming out of the water, but shrugged and began to inspect the sand particles at his feet when asked how he felt about Thursday's incident.

“Sharks scare me,” he said. “I don't like them.”

Judy Sobota teaches a weekly ocean safety class at the Museum of Coastal Carolina. One incident, she said, shouldn't change anybody's opinion of the ocean.

“It's a wonderful place,” Sobota said, “even if a shark comes up and nips you sometimes.”