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FHLBank Indianapolis account manager saves man, daughter from drowning in Lake Superior

“Had we not been there, that family dynamic would be a lot different right now,” 20-year Bank employee and former lifeguard Nick Groenleer says

INDIANAPOLIS – Ask yourself this question: “Have I ever saved someone from drowning?” Then ask yourself, “How about two people at once?”

For Nick Groenleer, AVP, Michigan Account Manager at FHLBank Indianapolis, the answer to both questions is yes. And it all happened in about 15 minutes the day before last month’s Community Bankers of Michigan (CBM) annual UP Forum in Marquette, Mich.

Nick, a 20-year veteran of the Bank, had taken colleagues to a formation in the Upper Peninsula called Black Rocks, a 25-foot-high cliff-jumping spot popular with thrill-seekers in Presque Isle Park.

A longtime Michigander and former lifeguard of 20 years, Nick had taken the leap many times and was showing colleagues the best way to approach the jump into the frigid Lake Superior waters below.

It was about 6 p.m., and the winds were picking up from an approaching storm. A few other tourists were there jumping, too, and Nick urged his group to get their jumps in before conditions got too nasty.



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- Nick Groenleer

After he jumped and began the challenging 40-yard or so swim to shore, he noticed a girl hesitantly preparing to jump as her father coaxed her from the water below. Nick watched her halting jump, then resumed negotiating the growing waves back to land.

When he looked back to check the girl’s progress, she was floundering and starting to panic. He immediately raced toward her, grabbed her arm and began pulling her toward shore as the growing waves hammered them both.

Then it hit him: “I’ll bet the father is in trouble, too,” Nick told himself. Sadly, he was right.

“God was nudging me to hang back for a moment, and just then the storm kicked up. I could see the guy eating one wave after another, and he was choking each time he got slammed. I thought, ‘My god, he’s straight up drowning.’ The guy was wide-eyed, and the look on his face said, ‘I’m going to die.’”

Nick didn't hesitate, and his lifeguard training and adrenaline kicked in. With the girl in tow, he made his way over to the man, "a rock-solid, muscle-bound dude who could easily mop the floor with me in a fight," said Nick, who stands over 6 feet himself. Nick had the man roll onto his back, put him in a cross-arm hold with his free arm and began slowly pushing the struggling pair to shore as the growing waves buffeted them all.

When they got out of the water, the father just sat down on the beach, "100% in shock, never blinking, just staring at the lake," Nick said. "People who know me know I hate attention and don't brag, but without a doubt, the man would have drowned without help, and his daughter would have watched it all."

Nick never got the man's name, but it did give him a new outlook on life.

"Life-changing events like this really put things in perspective," he said. "Getting ahead at work, societal pressures ... all that stuff just doesn't matter. That was the most important thing I've done in my life, and it proves God can use you at any minute."

He added: "I will never forget the look that father gave me in the water. Had we not been there, that family dynamic would be a lot different right now. It's a cliché, but I was in the right place at the right time, thank God."

About Black Rocks in Presque Isle Park

Black Rocks is a 1.7-billion-year-old formation of igneous rock called basalt found along Lake Superior, geologic outcroppings formed after the rapid cooling of lava flows from volcanic activity millions of years ago. The rocks, a popular attraction for hikers, photographers and thrill-seekers, are in Presque Isle Park, a 323-acre forested peninsula in Marquette County, Mich. Source: www.travelmarquette.com

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