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A Very Big Save

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A Very Big Save

In Washington for a White House internship, Colby hockey goalie Sam Parker '15 rescues woman from dangerous Potomac River rapids

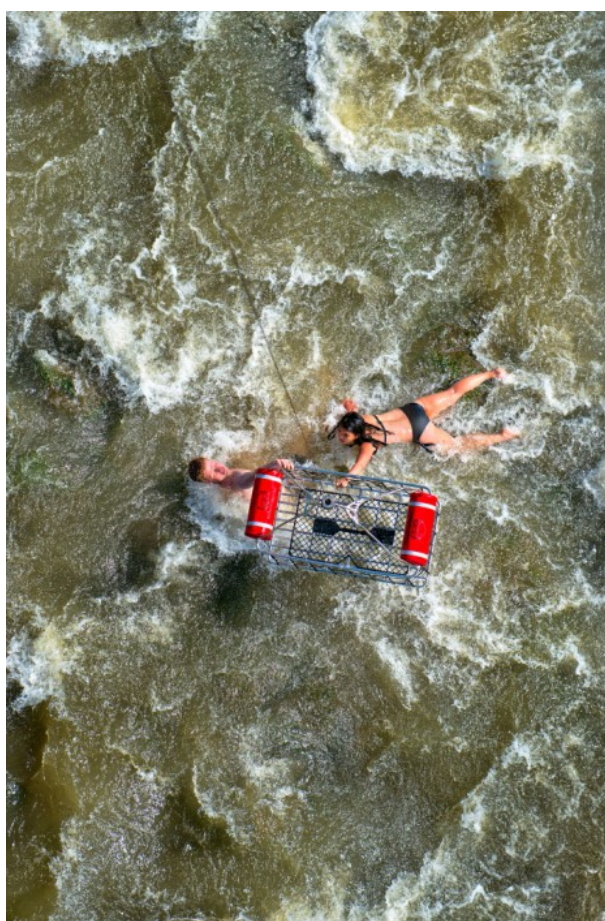
By Gerry Boyle '78

Colby hockey goalie Sam Parker '15 has made some big saves. Add one more.

Parker's rescue of a woman caught in dangerous rapids on the Potomac River ended with both swimmers being plucked from the fast-moving water by a rescue helicopter—and with Parker's nomination for a lifesaving award by the U.S. Park Police. "People don't normally put themselves in peril to go out and save people," said Park Police Rescue Technician Michael Abate, who hoisted the pair to safety. "In today's society people just sit back and get on their cell phones and start videotaping instead of actually taking action."

For Parker the action-packed day—May 25, the Sunday of Memorial Day weekend— began with a dip in the Potomac in Potomac, Md., with Colby buddy Kush Jadeja '15. Parker had just moved to Washington and was due to begin a White House internship the following week.

The pair was swimming at a rope swing on the riverfront, in an area marked by a crescent-shaped underwater wall



Sam Parker '15 guides a basket to swimmer Alyssa Vasiliou as a Park Police rescue helicopter hovers overhead at a stretch of rapids on the Potomac River in Maryland. Parker went to the woman's aid after she was swept away by strong currents.

known to locals as “the ledge” just offshore. Jadeja said the swing is a popular hangout for local high school kids. The location is just upstream from the Little Falls waterfall and Class III and IV rapids.

Abate said the stretch of river has been the site of many drownings, including three in the last year alone. “It’s just a dangerous area,” he said.

Parker and Jadeja were joined by a young man and woman who, after a few minutes, decided to swim 50 yards out to the edge of the ledge to view the rapids.

“Within two minutes of them getting out there, he’s yelling, ‘Help! Help! Come help us,’” Parker said. “We were like, is he kidding?”

When it became apparent the guy was serious, the Colby pair didn’t hesitate.

“It wasn’t a conscious decision,” Jadeja said. “We just got up and dove in.”

Parker and Jadeja swam out to the ledge and, standing on the smooth rocks in the fast current, saw that the young woman had slipped over the edge and was clinging to a rock amid the rapids. “While we’re debating [what to do], we hear a scream,” Parker said. “We look over and she’d been swept off the rock by the current. She was tumbling head over heels through those rapids. It’s a minefield of rocks.”

The plan was for Parker to swim after the woman; Jadeja, who knew the area, would swim back to shore and his phone, call 911, and direct responders to the scene. “He said, ‘I’m going in,’” Jadeja said. “‘If she hits her head it’s game over.’”

The six-foot-three, 240-pound Parker jumped off the ledge and was immediately submerged and caught in the torrent. The woman, later identified as Alyssa Vasiliou, a college student who lives nearby, was trying to grab onto rocks but continued to tumble through the rapids. Parker said he followed her feet-first and eventually caught up with her, grabbing her with one arm and wrapping his other arm around a boulder.



Park Police Rescue Technician Michael Abate guides Vasiliou onto a helicopter as Parker, in water below, awaits rescue.



Parker is squeezed into the rescue basket as he is hoisted from the rapids to the helicopter.

Meanwhile, Jadeja had returned to shore for his phone but found someone had taken the pair's clothes and belongings. He borrowed a phone from a bystander and explained the location to the police operator. Within minutes police cruisers, two ambulances, and a fire truck had converged on the riverfront. The emergency crews had an inflatable boat, but according to Abate, the rapids aren't navigable. "We were stable at that point," Parker said, "but we had no way of getting out."

The pair had been on the rock for about 15 minutes, he said, when they heard the whump-whump of an approaching helicopter. The Park Police rescue helicopter hovered and dropped a rescue basket down, and Vasiliou was rescued first.

"He insisted on loading the girl into the basket," Abate said, "which I thought was very gracious."

"We look over and she'd been swept off the rock by the current. She was tumbling head over heels through those rapids. It's a minefield of rocks."

After winching the basket up, Abate pulled Vasiliou into the helicopter and repeated the procedure with Parker. Within a few minutes, the pair was in a nearby hospital being evaluated. They came away from the mishap with just bumps and bruises.

Abate said his agency recognizes one or two members of the public each year for outstanding rescue efforts, and he had hoped that Parker's award would be finalized while Parker was still in Washington. (As of this writing it was still pending.) "What he did was an outstanding gesture," Abate said.

Parker went on to his real business at hand, which was working with White House Advisor on Violence Against Women Lynn Rosenthal. (His prior internship was with a special victims unit in Queens, N.Y.) Vasiliou, via Facebook, said she was "extremely grateful that Sam was there as he potentially saved my life." She'd already found Parker on Facebook and thanked him directly. "She said, 'I hope this isn't weird. I just want to thank you for risking your life to save me. ... It's crazy jumping in for someone you don't know.'"

Not so, Parker said. "In the moment," he said, "you don't think of anything."

Photos courtesy of Rich Muller/U.S. Park Police

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**Karen Heck** · Top Commenter · Colby College

Nice job, Sam Parker! See you are always there for women! So glad we got to meet at Bro's swearing in. I didn't realize at the time how much of a hero you were :)

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 4 · September 25, 2014 at 11:19am**Kay Ohh**

Wow!!! Awesome guy!!!

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · December 31, 2014 at 5:23am**Charlie Frank** · Colby

Wonderful story! Sam is a great guy and a wonderful goalie. Saves all around!

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 2 · September 25, 2014 at 11:35am**Liz Armstrong**

I wonder if you and Kush Jadeja ever got your things back or if you were a victim of crime while selflessly helping someone in peril!

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · November 20, 2014 at 11:51am**Stephen B. Collins** · Works at Colby College

I learned to kayak in Little Falls when I was Sam's age. It scared me, even in a boat wearing a PFD and a helmet. No award necessary to call this guy a hero.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 1 · September 26, 2014 at 1:01pm**Aaron Schlechter** · Wilton, Connecticut

Nice.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 1 · September 25, 2014 at 11:14am**Robert Clockedile** · Brunswick High School

Here's a video of the helicopter rescue shot by a bystander on the shore. Amazing stuff.
<http://clby.me/C6QYE>

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · September 30, 2014 at 6:30am**Ruth Peacock** · Colby College

You've made my day renewing my faith in the essential goodness of mankind. Thanks.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · September 26, 2014 at 4:26pm

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