

CITY/STATE

Austin man presumed drowned in Adriatic after fall from ferry

Melissa Tarkington; Ron Lubke
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A 22-year-old Austin man is missing and presumed drowned after he and a traveling companion fell from an Italian ferry into the Adriatic Sea.

Larry Welborn and Simone Scialdo, 21, of Bellevue, Wash., fell from the deck of the Italian ferry Espresso Venezia on Wednesday. Scialdo was rescued about 10 hours later, but Welborn has not been found.

Welborn had recently moved from Austin to live with his father in a small town outside of Frankfurt, Germany. He had been touring Europe with Tonya Hancock, 21, of Austin for about a week.

"We were just vagabonds," Hancock said in a telephone conversation from Corfu, Greece. "We were just going with the flow."

Hancock and Welborn met Scialdo and Tina Ellis, exchange students in Italy from Washington State University, while waiting for the ferry in Brindisi, Italy. The four were traveling to Corfu.

"Larry liked one of them. That was Simone," Hancock said. "When we got on the ferry, they took their little romantic walk on the deck. That was the last time we saw them."

Scialdo told a reporter from The Seattle Times that Welborn was "kidding, lifting me up, putting me up on the (ferry's) railing. I started slipping and he tried to pull me back on and he came with me."

The two fell about 40 feet into the water. "We were yelling for the boat," Scialdo said. "We watched it go off in the distance."

Hancock said when she and Ellis woke Thursday, they found they had missed their planned stop in Corfu. They also realized that Welborn and Scialdo were missing and alerted the ship's captain.

"We checked and all of their (Welborn and Scialdo's) luggage was still on the ferry. We knew they wouldn't get off the ship without their luggage."

But she said the ship's captain "wouldn't help us at all. He wouldn't page them or anything."

According to Scialdo, she and Welborn fell from the boat about 1 a.m. Thursday. Hancock said officials confirmed the two were missing about 6 p.m. Thursday.

By that time, Scialdo had been picked up by an Austrian yacht. But Scialdo said she had become separated from Welborn several hours before she was spotted.

"They floated together and comforted each other," said Hancock, "then they fell asleep in the water and floated apart."

"Simone said she woke up about 6 a.m. (Thursday) and Welborn wasn't there. She told me the last time she saw him he was swallowing a lot of water," Hancock said.

But Hancock has not given up on her friend. "He was a wonderful swimmer, so I have hope," she said. "He should have been able to take care of himself."

Scialdo was released from a hospital in Corfu late Saturday. She was resting in a hotel there with Hancock and Ellis.

"Physically, (Scialdo) is fine," Hancock said. "Her face is very sunburned and peeling. But mentally, she is not all right. She is going to need some help."

Hancock said she is angry about the way authorities have conducted the search for Welborn.

"The embassy tells us they are doing everything they can, but I don't feel like they are doing enough," Hancock said. "It has been four days. If he is still in the water, it is too late. If he has survived, he has no identification and no one would know who he is."

However, Nancy Mackey, with the U.S. Embassy in Athens, said an extensive search for Welborn has been conducted.

"Mostly Greek and Italian authorities are looking in the area," she said. "They have had planes and boats looking as well."

Mackey said officials suspended the search at 3 p.m. Saturday because of bad weather but said officials planned to resume the search this morning if the weather was clear.

Welborn is the son of Shirley Finney of Austin and Emmett Welborn, who lives in Germany. Finney was en route to Greece late Saturday, Hancock said.

Hancock said she and Welborn met at Porter Junior High School when she was in the seventh grade and Welborn was in the eighth.

"He was my boyfriend in high school," Hancock said. "We broke up about a year later and have been very good friends ever since."

Hancock said Welborn moved to Germany in October to live with his father, who is retired from the Air Force.

Tonya Hancock's mother, Kathy Hancock of Austin, said Welborn is artistic and "cares deeply about people. It was like him not to care about the consequences when helping others."

This article was supplemented with a report from the Knight-Ridder News Service.

MUG SHOT; MAP

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