

Richard Harness, White Kiver fishing trip, August 2003



My Time in the Cave

April 9, 2005

I was on an Age-to-Age Field Trip, which is like a big brother mentoring program from the Wesley Foundation at Arkansas Tech. Our field trip was to Devil's Den State Park, and I was with the 12 year old kid that I mentor. We were with a group of about 25 inside the cave. Everybody except for my kid, another kid and me had turned back. We got to a place where I couldn't fit, so I sent the kids on with another group to go through the cave and come out on the other end while I went back in the direction that we had come from. As I was coming around a corner through a tight passageway, my shoulders got stuck. Granted, I had already come through this passageway, sideways, just moments earlier. Once I managed to squeeze my shoulders through, my lower back and hips got stuck. After about 10 minutes of trying to free myself, some tourists coming through the cave found me. They tried their best to help me get out. Then someone called the Rangers. After about 45 minutes from the time I first got stuck, the Ranges arrived and tied a rope under my armpits to try to pull me out. After about an hour of pulling, the Rangers acquired a chisel and a mallet. They began chiseling at the rocks jutting into my lower back. This was very painful because the rock chips landed on my back, were scrapped off, and then cold water was poured on me to rinse the remainder off of me. This also made the rocks sharper which scrapped my back even more. One of the Rangers that was working so hard to free me, hit his finger and broke it. I hope that he has healed from the injury. I hate it that he got hurt helping me. By this time, I am feeling scared, but I knew that I had to remain calm. If I panicked, it would only make matters worse.

About two hours into the rescue, EMTs from Washington County arrived. They asked me a question that others had been asking me, "Are you cold?" By the time they asked me that question, I was shaking and shivering and felt very cold. They went for blankets and hot pads. (I kept on referring to them as hot pockets; maybe it was because I had missed lunch?) This act on their part probably saved my life by prolonging the hypothermia just long enough for the rescue. All this time, they are still trying to get me out. After about three hours of struggling, I am exhausted. All I can think about at this point is propping myself up with my right knee and praying. I had been saying short prayers before every attempt to pull me loose. The effort continued. Men pulling and tugging on the rope under my armpits in front, while others held my leg up with the collection of belts tied around my left leg that were put there by tourists that had tried to help me earlier. By this time, I was wondering if I was ever going to be freed from this cave. I even prayed and asked God if it was my time. Another hour and a half passes.

Four and a half hours after I had gotten stuck, the Washington County Search and Rescue Team arrives. They took charge and provided more manpower and better equipment, along with some fresh arms for tugging and pulling. When they got there, a peace came over me, and I began to have hope again that I would be freed. Also by this time, I am frigid. Talking, moving and staying alert are becoming difficult. If I would have really known what was going on at that time, I probably would have been freaking, but then again I was too tired to freak. David and others from the Rescue Team kept on talking to me and making jokes. I know now that they were really working to keep me alert.

After approximately 5 ½ hours into the rescue, I am freed. There was a passageway to get behind me and a man was back there. He took a pair of scissors and cut the butt out of my favorite fishing jeans and then tore the legs off the jeans down to my ankles. Next, he poured about a half a bottle of cooking oil on me. The Rangers had used oil too. This was about the third bottle of cooking oil that had been used on me during the rescue. They put the ropes around my armpits again, and in addition to that there was one placed around my waist, and another rope was on my left leg. When the signal was given, they all pulled from the front as the guy in the back held my left leg up. As they pulled, my body began to be freed. My prayers were being answered. They freed me! I was so excited to be able to stand up and move! There I stood with no pants on and my underwear stuck to me from all the cooking oil! I was a mess. I stunk from the sweat, blood, urine, cooking oil, and mud. No one seemed to care, as everyone was so happy to have me out! One of the men gave me a pair of coveralls. I am sorry that I didn't catch your name, but thanks for the pants.

I was able to walk out of the cave. It felt great to walk and be free again! Once outside the cave, the EMT checked me out some more and had me drink some water. Everyone was so relieved! Then I walked on out of the park under my own power. I sat in the ambulance and was given some information. Since I felt fine, I signed papers stating that I refused to go to the hospital. Finally, I got on the church bus and headed back to Russellville.

Overall, I was lucky; escaping with only scrapes, scratches and bruises. The scrapes have healed leaving only a couple of cool scars and a heck of a story to tell. Since then I have acquired a few nicknames such as "Cave Man"

and the “Spelunker” and have been asked to tell this story many times. This story has been told in at least three newspapers, on a few radio stations, and on at least two television stations. I hope that my story will help others to be safe in caves and to never explore them alone.

Directly after the incident, I struggled. At times I was very emotional and not the lighthearted guy that I usually am. I was so sore. The injuries to my back made it impossible to carry my backpack. I was unable to button my pants or tie a pair of shoelaces. It made sitting in class very difficult and almost torturous. I could not sleep on my side for weeks because all I could think about was being on my side in that cave. One thing that I learned from the experience is that the little things in life matter. I became more thankful for things like walking. Something, I didn't know I was ever going to be able to do again. Just being alive is reason to smile! I had a lot of time to think while I was stuck. I thought about my life and my relationship with God. I got closer to God during my stay in that hole, and once I was freed, I have thanked Him constantly for sparing my life and for letting me see another day and take another breath.

To all the rescue workers... I owe you my very life! My up most gratitude goes out to you for saving my life. Had it not been for your tireless efforts, I would not be alive today. Thank you for taking time from your lives to rescue me! Thanks for the endless hours of training that you do at your own expense and for caring enough to help a stranger that was helpless. You are my heroes! May God richly bless each of you.

Richard Harness, Student
ATU, Russellville, Arkansas

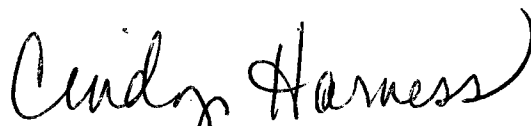
Dear Mr. John Luther,

It has been just over four months since Richard's experience in the cave at Devil's Den State Park. He seems to be doing very well with no long-term problems from that event.

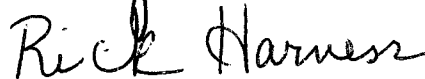
We wanted to share the event from Richard's point of view in hopes that it might be of help to you and your staff in the future and to most importantly say thank you to the many people that were involved in saving his life. Please find enclosed his point of view in his writing, "My Time in the Cave."

Please extend our thanks to your entire staff. One of the staff members from the Wesley Foundation was able to gather some of the names for us, but we know that there were many more involved in various ways. As Richard's parents we say thank you from the bottom of our hearts. If any of you are ever in the Harrison area and need our help, please call on us.

Sincerely,



Rick and Cindy Harness
Harrison, Arkansas



Dear Mr. John Luther,

I wish that I had all the names of the people involved in my rescue. Please thank these heroes and any that you know about other than the ones on this list.

Thank you Washington County Search & Rescue Team:

Jason Goodwin

Brett Freeland

Kevin Thiesen

Cindy Shuler

John Parson

Joe Wittkop

Becky Patton

Marlon Schiffman – EMT

Diane Aday

Keith Culbertson

David Comstock – Head guy who gave orders and talked to me continually! Thank you David and your trained team for knowing what to do and for getting me out!

Liberty Fire Department

Brandon Holley – Brandon was camping and came up to help.

Tulsa Troop 1 – First Aid

Ann Hughes – Ann was camping and came to help.

Jesse Cox – Superintendent of Devil's Den State Park

Park Rangers – I wish I had their names. Please tell them thanks for me.

Tourists – That found me, tried to help me, and sent for the Rangers.

Area dispatchers, and other authorities that I don't even know about – Thank you for the work you do every day.



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/MICHAEL WOODS

Richard Harness (center) of Russellville rests as he is given fluids by Washington County rescue workers after spending about 5½ hours stuck in a cave at Devil's Den State Park. Harness followed some children into a cave and got stuck.

Washington County

Russellville man stuck 5 hours in cave is freed

BY KATE WARD
NORTHWEST ARKANSAS TIMES

A Russellville man was pulled from a cave at Devil's Den State Park on Saturday after being trapped for nearly 5½ hours.

Richard Harness walked away without assistance after the rescue, witnesses said.

Harness and Melissa Jones, also of Russellville, were visiting the park with a group of children from Age to Age, a mentoring program offered through Arkansas Tech University in Russellville, Jones said.

"He was following the kids into a cave, but then decided not to so he wouldn't get stuck," Jones explained. "Unfortunately, he got stuck anyway."

Jones said Harness became trapped about 11:30 a.m. She said the group had a set check-in time. She knew something was wrong when Harness didn't show up at that time, she said.

"By the time I got back up there, people had already gone to get help," she said.

Deputies from the Washington County sheriff's office set up a command center near the road leading to the caves to assist rescuers.

Members of the Washington County Department of Emergency Management also responded to the call. Devil's Den has its own rescue team as well.

Harness was freed about 5 p.m., Jones said.

John Luther, director of emergency management, said a major threat for people trapped in caves is hypothermia.

"If your body is constantly exposed to 58-degree temperatures and you're sweating, body temperature is reduced by 25 percent," he said. "That's why search and rescue workers have to layer clothing and consume plenty of fluids, along with food."

Man rescued from Devil's Den cave after more than 5 hours

BY KATE WARD

Northwest Arkansas Times

Emergency personnel from Washington County and Devil's Den State Park rescued a Russellville man Saturday who was lodged between rocks in a cave for nearly five and half hours.

Although rescuers offered to carry him down the hill, Richard Harness insisted he was OK to walk.

According to Melissa Jones of Russellville, she and Harness were with a group of kids from "Age to Age," a mentoring program through Arkansas Technical University in Russellville.

"He was following the kids into a cave, but then decided not to so he wouldn't get stuck," she said. "Unfortunately, he got stuck anyway."

According to Jones, Harness was stuck in the cave from about 11:30 a.m. to 5



JENNIFER SAVARNO Northwest Arkansas Times

Richard Harness waves to a crowd of onlookers after he was rescued from a cave in Devil's Den State Park on Saturday. Harness, who was touring the park with a group from Russellville, was stuck in the cave for 5 1/2 hours.

p.m. She said the group had a set a check-in time and when Harness didn't show up, she knew something was wrong.

"By the time I got back up there, people had already gone to get help," she said.

According to witnesses, rescuers had to cut off the bottom part of Harness' pants in order to free him from the cave.

A Washington County

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Rescue

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Sheriff's Office Command Center was set up near the road to assist rescuers.

"Usually when we perform rescues like this, the person is lost," said John Luther, director of the Washington County Department of Emergency Management. "The command center has computers, grids and printers set up, so we can find a route of least resistance."

A couple of cave rescues have been performed within the past 45 days, Luther said.

"Usually, the Devil's Den rescue team works each rescue in the park, since they are first on the scene," he said. "They call us for assistance or reinforcement."



JENNIFER SAVARNO Northwest Arkansas Times

A crowd of emergency personnel and onlookers surrounds Richard Harness, center, after he was rescued from a cave in Devil's Den State Park on Saturday.

According to Luther, one of the biggest threats about cave rescues is hypothermia. "If your body is constantly exposed to 58 degree temperatures and you're sweating, body temperature is reduced by 25 percent," he said. "That's why search and rescue workers have to layer clothing and consume plenty of fluids, along with food."