

Cave accident raises safety awareness

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Safety Tips for Caving

- Leave a realistic call-out time with a responsible person before a group goes into a cave
- If medical help is needed, first call 911 and then the designated evacuation coordinator
- If someone is injured, keep the person comfortable with food, clothing and water
- Cavers should have knowledge and experience to get out of the cave safely
- Cavers should know all emergency phone numbers

REBECCA DOUGHERTY / graphics editor

Vanzandt said he was released from Rockingham Memorial Hospital on Thursday after being treated for a fractured vertebrae, a bruised left hip and shoulder and some abrasions.

Senior Edward Render, the Caving Club's underground coordinator during the rescue, said Vanzandt was assisting freshman Jimmy Royster into a rappelling system at the time of the fall. Render was phoned by Royster after Vanzandt fell.

"Jon was in the process of checking out his rig when two of his three main support holes broke. It is unusual for rocks to break, but this particular cave is dry in some areas — and if you find an area that is weak, rocks may tend to break. He fell 30 feet down the ravine," Render said.

Render said he remembers Royster's call distinctly, "He said 'Ed, Jon fell and it's bad.'"

Royster told Render that Vanzandt had fallen about 30 feet

and could only hear Vanzandt's moaning. Render said he instructed Royster to make sure two people were with him the entire time and that the rest of the cavers spread out across the cave entrance and field to guide rescue personnel to Vanzandt.

Render trained last year as an underground coordinator by the National Cave Rescue Commission during a weekend

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Caver home resting following 30-foot fall

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course in West Virginia.

After hanging up with Royster, Render then called 911 to report a possible cave rescue. He told the operator the necessary information about the accident and then called junior Stephen Durkee and sophomore Patrick Rodgers, who had attended the same training session as Render. Render also called other experienced cavers from the club.

"Jon had fallen 30 feet and the only way out would be up," Render said. "The closest ledge was still 15 feet up."

When an EMT finally did get down to Vanzandt to evaluate him, he called for "full immobilization," which Render said he knew meant a severe back injury.

Render said the EMT initially requested that a helicopter transport Vanzandt to University of Virginia's Medical Center.

EMT's then worked to get Vanzandt stable and in a "SKED," a type of small stretcher used for confined spaces. Vanzandt was then put into a vertical position and hoisted up 15 feet to the people above that were pulling on a rope that Rodgers had set up, Render said.

Vanzandt was then lifted up another 15 feet by a new rope set up by one of the fireman and then carried by several people out of the cave. Render said Vanzandt had been rescued in three and a half hours and was injured for five hours. The helicopter was called off and Vanzandt was transported to Rockingham Memorial Hospital.

Vanzandt is currently at his Fredericksburg home recovering from the accident. Render said he expected Vanzandt to be fully recovered from his back injury in

about 18 weeks.

Caving accidents are "a rare occurrence," freshman MUSG member Mark Pinnow said. Pinnow has participated in events with the club and commended it for its safety precautions when the group explores caves.

A caver should never go in a cave alone, and a "buddy system" should be used at all times, Pinnow said. "You should never be out of sight of someone else's light," Pinnow said.

Carl Bolyard, coordinator of adventure programs at the UREC, said each caving expedition UREC arranges is preceded by a pre-trip meeting in which the cavers meet trip leaders and receive instructions about materials to bring and guidelines they're expected to follow.

"We try to keep a four-to-one ratio," Bolyard said. "We explain

to them that we'll be traveling together as a small group."

Caving groups are usually small in order to provide adequate leadership and lessen the amount of environmental impact on the cave, Bolyard said.

Pinnow said leaders carry a cave pack containing extra light sources, batteries, food, water and first-aid kits. UREC trip leaders also carry the medical history of each participant on the trip as well as emergency phone numbers and a calling card in case of a serious caving accident.

"Self-rescue is much more preferable than a rescue team," Bolyard said. If a person is injured during a UREC caving trip, a three to five "runner party" would be delegated to leave the cave and call for help. They would take with them a first-aid kit and documentation of the injured person's condition,

Bolyard said. If the leader thinks the injury is minor, the group may be instructed to assist the injured person out of the cave.

Although not every caving accident is avoidable, UREC emphasizes the importance of accident prevention, Bolyard said. Both UREC and MUSG trip leaders follow and enforce strict safety rules to provide a safe experience for the people exploring the caves, he said.

"One NCRC member told me that this was his 24th rescue in 20 years. It was the smoothest rescue operation that he had ever experienced because of the quick action taken by our grotto," Render said. "We were commended for our knowledge and our readiness. Supposedly it was our club's response time that saved the rescue operation about an hour."