Injured woman carried from cave

Laurel Caverns rescuers extricate novice spelunker

By Jan Ackerman
and Johnna A. Pro
Post-Gazette Staff Writers

A group of rescue workers performing a practice drill in the Laurel Caverns yesterday tossed aside a mock victim when it was called to the aid of a Wilmerding woman who had been injured after falling nearly 20 feet while spelunking.

Kelly McKenzie, 23, was rescued around 7:30 p.m. seven hours after she slipped and fell off a three-tiered stone ledge near a rock named the Post Office in a portion of the caves reserved for experienced spelunkers.

Yesterday was the first time McKenzie had ventured into a cave. She and three friends, all of whom had been caving before, were exploring in the undeveloped portion of the cave, about 2,000 to 3,000 feet from the main entrance of the caverns in Farmington, Fayette County, when McKenzie fell.

She was taken by STAT Medevac helicopter to Mercy Hospital, where she was listed in serious condition. A hospital spokeswoman said McKenzie was awake and alert and undergoing X-rays to determine the severity of fractures of her arms and legs.

Her friends — Kris Emeloff, 26, of Peters, Hills, Cheryl Cecullo, 23, of Wilmerding and Michael Rusnock, 26, also of Wilmerding, were not injured.

Even though McKenzie had not been cave exploring in the past, Emeloff said, she was able to keep up with her more experienced friends.

"She was finding better footholds than I was," he said after the rescue.

Emeloff said McKenzie, who was wearing sneakers with worn treads, lost her footing about 90 minutes after the foursome began hiking through the caverns at 11 a.m.

When she fell, she had the wind knocked out of her. Then she rolled over and started screaming," Emeloff said. "I put her head on my knee to steady it in case she had a head injury and lost talking to her.

As Emeloff and Cecullo comforted their friend, Rusnock began making his way to the main entrance of the caverns.

He hiked about 15 minutes and met up with three dozen rescuers who had entered the caverns around 9 a.m. for a mock rescue drill.

SEE RESCUE, PAGE C-6

RESCUE FROM PAGE C-1

When Rusnock happened upon them, they were trying to maneuver a dummy on a stretcher out of the caverns.

"I said, 'We've got a situation here.' They asked if it was real and I said it was," Rusnock said, recounting the story.

A. Richard Fogle, the sub-regional coordinator for the National Cave Rescue Commission's Eastern Region, said the rescue team's first concern was to keep McKenzie warm because the temperature in the 55-million-year-old cave is a constant 52 degrees.

Fogle said McKenzie was wrapped in heat packs and that two doctors — one of them Keith Conover from Mercy Hospital, a medical advisor to the cave group — were brought to the scene to assess her injuries. Once stabilized, McKenzie was placed in a Stokes Basket, a specialized stretcher, and inch ed to the mouth of the cave.

Fogle said the Western Maryland Grotto and Hopwood Fire Department were sponsoring the class in the cave. About 100 rescue personnel from nearby communities participated in the rescue.

He said the rescue took so long because McKenzie had to be removed from the cave on a stretcher at a slow, tedious pace. Many parts of the cave were too narrow for the stretcher to fit through, Fogle said, so volunteers had to maneuver the stretcher carefully.

"You have to have people lined up, passing the stretcher along," he said. "There is no room."

The Laurel Caverns, 15 miles Southeast of Uniontown on the Chestnut Ridge, form the largest natural cave North of the Mason-Dixon Line.

Owner David Cole said that while others had been rescued from the 2.3 miles of caverns, there had been no fatalities at the site since the caverns opened July 1, 1964.
Injured novice gives up caving

"I didn't believe it was dangerous," she said. "My friends weren't concerned."

While her concussion has obliterated any memory of the fall itself, McKenzie does recall the trip out of the cave as rescuers nudged her toward the entrance.

Not realizing how seriously she was hurt, she wanted at first to walk out on her own. She recalls being scared, particularly when rescuers stopped to try to figure out a way to squeeze her through one section of the cave.

Yesterday she realized how fortunate she was.

"I'm lucky I had only two broken arms and not anything else broken, where I might be paralyzed or something," she said.

Her doctor, Harold Sherman, a trauma surgeon, agreed. "I don't know what broke her fall, but she certainly could have sustained much more serious injuries."

McKenzie, mother of a daughter, Renay, 3, had nothing but praise for the workers who got to put their practice into action.

"I think they're great," she said. "I'm glad everyone was there. I wish there was something I could do to tell them I'm glad they were there." Sherman called the rescue effort "very impressive," particularly because crews were working in the dark and dealing with injuries that weren't easily obvious. Two doctors from Mercy — Keith Conover and Eric Swanson — made the trip to the cave by helicopter to help stabilize McKenzie.

But less than 24 hours after being brought to Mercy, she was looking forward to going home to her husband, Phillip, and her daughter possibly as early as today.

While her days as a spelunker are over, she said, she's still willing to try anything once, just for the fun of it. What's next, she was asked — bungee jumping? "I don't know. I might," she said. "I heard they had it set up down in the Strip, but I have to wait until my arms are better."