

Injured woman carried from cave



Bill Wade/Post-Gazette

A. Richard Fogle, a coordinator with the National Cave Rescue Commission's Eastern Region, uses a map to explain the rescue effort.

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 its 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 Penn Hills, Cheryl Cucullo, 23, of Wilmerding and Michael Rusnock, 26, also of Wilmerding, were not injured.

Even though McKenzie had not



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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 a worn tread, 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 secure it in case she had a head injury and kept talking to her."

As Emeloff and Cucullo 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.

Woman rescued in cavern

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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 caving group — were brought to the scene to assess her injuries. Once stabilized, McKenzie was placed in a Stokes Basket, a specialized stretcher, and inched 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 Cale 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.

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WEDNESDAY, JULY 13, 1993

I cave trip is enough for her

Injured woman can't recall fall

By Mark Belko
Post-Gazette Staff Writer

Kelly McKenzie is going to have to learn to keep herself out of the punch line.

When McKenzie saw rescue workers gathered at Laurel Caverns Sunday morning to practice cave emergencies, she joked to friends that she probably would provide them with the real thing.

The joke is about the only thing the 23-year-old Wilmerding woman remembers about what led up to her falling nearly 20 feet from a ledge in the cave, leaving her with two broken arms, a concussion and scrapes and bruises.

"I actually made a joke about it," she said yesterday from her bed at Mercy Hospital. "I said something like, it was a good thing they were there so that when I fall they can help me. I was just joking. I didn't know I would need them."

McKenzie was well aware yesterday that neither her injuries nor the rescue — which took seven hours as crews guided her through narrow cave passages — were a laughing matter.

And she was dead serious about one thing — her first try at spelunking would be her last.

"I'm not going into a cave again," she vowed. "No, no way. There are just too many things that I would be afraid of that could happen."

McKenzie said she decided at the last minute to join three friends — Kris Emeloff, 26, of Penn Hills, and Cheryl Cucullo, 23, and Michael Rusnock, 26, both of Wilmerding — for the trip to Laurel Caverns in Farmington, Fayette County, even though she never had been spelunking before.

"I wasn't going to go at first," she said. "Then it just sounded like fun, so I thought I would try it."

McKenzie said she did not know that the area in which she fell — 2,000 to 3,000 feet from the entrance and near a rock named the Post Office — was reserved for more experienced cavers.



Thomas Ondrey/Post-Gazette

Kelly McKenzie is recovering at Mercy Hospital after falling nearly 20 feet at Laurel Caverns. She has two broken arms, a concussion and scrapes and bruises.

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Injured novice gives up caving

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"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, 5, 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 discernible. 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 some place down in the Strip, but I have to wait until my arms are better."