



Address To The International Boating and Water Safety Summit

By Loreena McKennitt

Newport Beach, California
March 16, 2005

Thank you so much for inviting me here tonight.

I consider it a great honour for me to speak to North America's leaders in water safety....

This organization is at the very forefront of what my own efforts have attempted to help achieve: a change in the way that our society behaves on the water.

So, you've given me a real gift in inviting me here...

And it's truly a kind act to a Canadian.

You see, in Toronto in March, "water safety" means not falling in vast puddles of melting snow, and PFD stands for "profoundly frozen digits."

Some Canadians will do anything to get to California in March.

So thank you...

When your past chair, Marty Law, and Barbara Byers, from the Canadian Safe Boating Council invited me here, they made note in their letter of my own story. As you may know, I lost my fiancé Ron Rees, in a boating incident seven years ago, on Georgian Bay, which is located in the northeast half of Lake Huron.

Shortly after that, I launched the Cook-Rees Memorial Fund for Water Search and Safety which went on to raise well over \$3 million dollars, from personal donations and largely from sales of a recording I was mixing at the time of Ron's death.

Because I had little background in this whole area, I was assisted in assembling an advisory group with some of Canada's top experts in water safety and search and rescue.

And we've now spent close to seven years funding water search and safety initiatives across the country - including many run by police forces, by the Canadian Coast Guard, and by community organizations.

Three years ago we also funded a landmark study called "Will It Float?", which took the most rigorous look to date at all the issues surrounding the mandatory use of Personal Flotation Devices. That report was done for the Canadian Safe Boating Council by a very innovative research group in Canada called SMARTRISK.

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It has really changed the nature of the PFD/lifejacket debate in Canada and, I understand, is becoming quite well known here too. I'm told that the report is starting to find its way in front of many legislators and industry leaders across the U.S.

So we've been hard at work for the past while.

But for all of that, I must say, I don't normally talk much in public about Ron's story. As I'm sure you'll appreciate, it is very personal, and it is still very painful.

I do want to talk about it here tonight however, because I sense a rare kinship in this group.

Some of you are here because you have experienced the kind of pain that I have. Many of you - most of you, I imagine - are here because you dedicate your lives to making sure that others don't have to feel this pain.

All of us are here because we want to help others enjoy the water as a blessing, not as a threat.

And so I do want to take you through this and tell you what I think could have saved my fiancé Ron Rees' life, and the life of his brother Rick, and of their friend Greg Cook.

On Friday, July 17, 1998 at the end of their work day, Ron, Rick and Greg headed over to a friend's cottage which was about two hours north of Toronto on Georgian Bay. I was in England at the time, mixing a live album. Ron and I had established a practice of calling each other at approximately the same hour of each day no matter what time zone we were in. On this particular night however, I tried to reach him but there was no answer and thinking that something must have come up, I headed off to bed only to be awakened at three in the morning with the call we never want to get.

Now, Georgian Bay is gorgeous. But it's heavy water.

The lake is very deep. The shoreline sits right under an escarpment that can create fast changes in weather. And it's open. You have to be a good sailor to enjoy Georgian Bay.

Late that afternoon Ron, Rick and Greg - all good swimmers - set out for a brief sail in a small dinghy something like an Albacore.

The weather was nice. The day had been very hot. No doubt they thought this was going to be a quick sail before joining their friends who regularly gathered on the weekend.

An hour or two went by - the sun finished setting, darkness had fallen and yet, the boat had not come back.

In the meantime, many of the Friday night regulars had gathered at the cottage to have a bite to eat and hang out for a while. Knowing that the fellas had gone out earlier, they were beginning to wonder what had happened to them. But no one bothered to follow up.

Even the next morning, with Ron and his brother and friend still gone, no one called for help.

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Finally, at about 1 p.m. the next day, one of Ron's friends, after stopping at the grocery store, drove down to the local Coast Guard station to make inquiries. And just as he walked onto the pier, he saw a Coast Guard boat towing in the sail boat.

Someone else had seen the capsized boat drifting along and called it in.

The Coast Guard brought in a helicopter from the closest air force base, and then set about looking for survivors. At 4:00 PM on Saturday afternoon they found Ron, face down, wearing a PFD.

And after a long week of searching the others were never found.

Now, most of you may recognize in this short account of that incident a series of "what-not-to-dos" or what if's. The reality is that we don't really know what happened out there that night.

But we do know three things that sealed their fate.

First: Rick and Greg weren't wearing PFDs.

I cannot say it enough. You know that I am a songwriter. And if boating is a song, then "PFDs" are the chorus. You can't say it enough.

So, that's the first lesson: Wherever you stand on the issue of mandatory PFDs, *wear* PFDs, *preach* PFDs and *love* PFDs.

Ron was wearing one, but succumbed to hypothermia after a long night in the water ...but at least I had him to bury.

That, of course, is not the most important reason to wear one. You wear one to survive the cold shock/gasp reflex and to stay alive until someone comes to help.

And then there's the second thing that sealed their fate: Denial.

No one called for help... It amazes me still that people just waited in that cottage knowing that they were out there. And I wonder what they could have been thinking... The Coast Guard told me later that, because Ron actually was wearing a PFD, he might have survived for some time in the water.

And that if someone had set about looking for him early enough that night, they might have found him alive.

It is unsettling indeed to think that denial is such a powerful force in our culture. So powerful that people will deny a clear and present danger and hesitate to do the simplest things to save their own lives or the lives of people close to them.

And I'm not just thinking of the denial in the cottage that night.

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I'm also thinking of the kinds of denial that one sees in boats all the time... even among many experienced skippers, who sometimes deny the need to follow what they think of as someone else's rules.

The best skippers don't deny risk, they expect it and plan for it.

I'm also talking about the denial that's so rampant among casual boaters. That denial which says, "I'm not really a boater. I don't need to take a course or wear a PFD or check the weather. I'm just going fishing three minutes away at the edge of the lake."

Denial - from expert boaters, from casual boaters, and from onlookers, even from the boating industry - is responsible for many of the deaths we are all working so hard to prevent.

The third thing that sealed their fate was cold. Let me be very clear: I am not just talking about hypothermia from long term immersion, I'm talking about the short term effects of even moderately cold water. The well known British researcher Michael Tipton defines cold water as anything less than 70 degrees. And this isn't just about Canada either. It's about almost every body of water in North America.

As everyone knows, hypothermia can kill you by lowering your core body temperature.

Fewer people know about cold shock - or the "gasp reflex". This happens in only 30 seconds. And it happens in water that is as warm as 59° Fahrenheit (15° C). That's the average temperature of one of the Great Lakes in July.

Everyone - from an overweight person to an Olympic swimmer - has the same reflex. The minute you fall in the water, the gasp reflex of cold shock makes you inhale close to your total lung capacity.

That can lead to uncontrollable hyperventilation, which means you can't swim or put on a lifejacket or do anything but panic. If you're in heavy chop, it also means you've just inhaled a lung full of water.

That's what even mild cold water does in the *first thirty* seconds.

Next comes swimming failure. In study after study, even strong swimmers had trouble moving their limbs after more than 20 minutes of immersion in water at 53° Fahrenheit (12° C). They felt their arms and legs go numb, making it very hard to handle the straps and zippers of a PFD, or to get back into a boat.

Only then does hypothermia become the big danger.

And the fact is that, in the middle of July - on a day that was so hot you were sweating and thirsty from sunup to sundown, on a day that the water looked refreshing and indeed was refreshing for a 20 minute dip at noon, on a day when no one could have believed a person could die of cold - the cold is what probably killed Ron.

I say probably because no one will ever know for sure what killed Ron, Rick and Greg.

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But I can tell you this simple truth: You could be a great boater or a strong swimmer - and, once you've been in the water for a few minutes without a PFD, you're no better off than a novice who can barely swim.

When we ignore that simple truth about PFDs, and attribute deaths of people who don't wear PFDs primarily to other secondary factors - like the age of their boat, or the weather, or a boater's experience - we are in the same kind of denial as everyone in that cottage that night.

I feel compelled to stress this because when I ask myself, "would this have happened today, eight years later?" the answer - we all know it - is yes, it would happen again today.

It probably did happen today.

Earlier today, how many people out for an afternoon cruise on Grand Lake in Oklahoma actually wore their PFDs?

How many people are making that same mistake tonight, just next door, at the marinas here in Newport Beach?

And in a couple of months it will also be happening on Casco Bay in Maine, and the Snake River in Washington State. People will be making those same mistakes, thousands of times a day right across this continent.

I have surprised myself with the bluntness of that answer - because I am by nature a very optimistic person, I have a great deal of faith in people. And this kind of an answer is an uncharacteristic one for me.

But I give myself that blunt answer, because I cannot avoid the fact that behaviour has *not* changed. We are not appreciably better in North America at wearing PFDs.

Every year the equivalent of one fully loaded 747 crashes into the lakes and rivers and waterways and coastlines of this continent - one or two people at a time, in boating incidents and drowning.

We are well acquainted with the complex problems that we face.

We are fighting against culture - in some cases, social cultures that have never behaved very safely on boats and don't want to.

We are fighting against pride - the pride of people who, because they are strong swimmers or because they have been fishing or sailing for decades, think there is no danger....

We are confronting peoples' legitimate argument that they have the right to make their own choices and not be told what to do.

We are fighting against - I don't know how else to put it - casualness, relaxation, a desire, on a boat, to just lay back and not think about anything too serious, which is really as it should be, within certain limits...

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All of these things make the job of changing behaviour on water enormously difficult.

You could look at that, and be overwhelmed. Because a lot of us in this room have done enormous work over the past number of years to change the picture.

But I hope that we are not overwhelmed. A powerful moment is slowly and quietly arriving for us.

We know more now than ever before about the real risks in water, about the physiological risks in particular, and how to prevent them.

Because we know more, we have raised awareness about water safety to an unprecedented level. Boaters may not be changing their behaviour. But a lot more think twice about it than ever before.

And leaders in boating and related industries who had never led the discussion about danger and safety are starting to lead now. The culture of safety, which has always been an important part of boating, is growing even bigger.

There is, in other words, something of a tipping point coming our way. And with this in mind, some of you may be interested to read Malcolm Gladwell's book called "The Tipping Point" which examines how social change can occur.

We have the chance to change behaviour now.

So the question before us tonight is clear: How can we tip the knowledge we have gained, and the growing consensus about safety in our boating community, into really changing behaviour in the broader public - including people like me, who boat only every now and then?

And while there is no single answer, there are components to one.

Let me start by raising a controversial issue. The mandatory wearing of PFDs.

Now, I am a Canadian. And it's not my place to be telling Americans what they should do. So I will keep my brief thoughts on this to the level of principle, which applies to both of our communities.

In principle, people need to know that if you want to stay alive in a boating incident, wearing a personal flotation device before the incident is not optional - it is essential.

I don't know how you put on a lifejacket if you have been thrown from a boat and knocked unconscious.

I don't know how you put on a lifejacket, even if you're conscious, but hyperventilating and struggling to stay afloat.

It is incredibly hard, if not impossible to put a lifejacket on when you're already in the water. People just have to imagine how they would do it, and most people get it.

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The simple truth is this: By the time you need a lifejacket, it's too late to put one on.

And yet... and yet...

Most of our governments in both of our countries essentially tell us the exact opposite. They tell us that by having one accessible, you can still put one on when you need it.

If you're unconscious, you can *still* put one on.

If you've been thrown into the water and your gasp reflex has you actually inhaling water into your lungs, you can still take a few minutes to put on a lifejacket.

They tell us that, when they compel us to put lifejackets and PFDs *in* our boats, but *not* to wear them.

It's like telling people to strap a motorcycle helmet to your bike.... Because you might need it if you get into an incident.

Two years ago, when a 46 year-old angler in Pike County, Pennsylvania fell off his motorboat and died, that incident happened as quickly as any motorcycle incident on any interstate.

Making PFDs mandatory to wear - not just to have - may be difficult to achieve. It may be resisted. It may assault the pride of a boater.

None of that is really the point.

The point is that not having a regulatory standard from the most powerful voice in the country - a voice we look to for public information about safety - is sending the wrong signal. It undermines everything we are trying to do.

Having clear direction tells everyone in Canada and the U.S.: You need to wear this thing *before* the incident, because you won't have the time to put it on when you need it.

In truth, just having the debate is important. I am convinced that by fuelling the debate about the mandatory wearing of PFDs, we are doing more than anything else to raise awareness about this issue.

In my experience, the hurdle is not even quite as high as we might all think.

Up in Canada, Dragon Boat racing is a big part of the summer. Lots of companies sponsor boats and encourage their employees to participate - thousands of people - join Dragon Boat crews.

None of them used to wear PFDs.

And if you'd asked someone why not, they would give you all the reasons you know so well - they're the same reason you hear from anglers, and sailors, and canoeists and kayakers:

- it's not part of the culture
- it gets in the way of the sport
- it looks stupid...

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- it's too expensive

But just as the Dragon Boat community was a microcosm of the whole PFD debate, it became a powerful example of how quickly a confluence of voices related to PFDs can change the behaviour of a whole community.

The Cook-Rees Memorial Fund raised the PFD question with the Dragon Boaters Association, and we weren't alone.

The Coast Guard played a significant role. PFD manufacturers joined in and brought their new paddling lifejacket designs right to the participants.

More importantly, perhaps, the insurance companies and the folks who organised dragon boat events got on board. We only had to get them thinking about two dozen paddlers overboard in the Toronto harbour to motivate them on the issue.

To help seal the deal, we funded PFDs for one of the top dragon boat teams in Ontario - the Shaolin Monks. They raced and won in comfortable PFDs, showing leadership and laying bear the argument that wearing a PFD would impede competition and enjoyment.

The final piece of this puzzle was achieved when, with the expert help of the Ontario Lifesaving Society, the Fund supported the development of a Dragon Boat Safety Protocol and handbook and seminar and this was adopted by the Ontario Dragon Boat Association. And this included the mandatory wear of PFDs by all participants in all training and competition activity. This illustrate how many voices can come together and change the way a whole sport behaves.

Come up to Canada this summer and you'll see Dragonboaters wearing PFDs, not arguing about PFDs.

Now they're arguing about the size of their paddle.

I raise that because it speaks to a critical point that sometimes gets obscured when we focus too much on the debate about mandatory wearing of PFDs.

People won't really change their behaviour just by changing a law.

But they *may* change their behaviour if we make this idea very personal to them.

And making ideas personal is a topic that, as a recording artist, I do know something about.

There are a few ways to make safety personally meaningful to people.

One is to promote it publicly. You're doing that, and I would urge you to keep doing it. Don't pull punches when it comes to pulling on heartstrings.

There's a very effective TV ad I've seen - I'm not sure from where and I apologize,

It shows two little children - maybe a four-year old and a two-year old in a small aluminum boat... Wearing their PFDs, and crying.

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Then, as the camera pans out, you see that they are alone in this boat. And their boat is drifting in the middle of a lake. And these two little children don't know what to do because their parents aren't anywhere around.

And the ad says something like: "you made them wear their lifejackets... why didn't you?"

Whoever made that ad knew how to strike a nerve.

If we, in our daily work, can make moms and dads think twice....

If we can make kids think twice, then we are beginning to tip the balance.

I don't know if there is a formula for this... But I think there is an impulse.

It's the impulse that was missing from Ron's cottage that night. It's the impulse to say, I will bother to raise my own voice. I *will* "call it as I see it" and take personal responsibility for the safety of another individual.

Even if that feels awkward for a moment.

There is nothing as powerful as one individual advocating for another's safety. There is nothing more powerful than one person speaking respectfully and caringly with another person who needs help.

We can change the laws in our countries.

We can change awareness in our counties.

But if we really want to tip the balance from better awareness to better behaviour, that will happen one person at a time.

So this is why we don't have to be overwhelmed by that "747". Because it's falling one person at a time, and we catch them one person at a time.

When I think back to how we lost Ron in 1998, one image that I cannot forget is of the beach at Meaford, Ontario. Every morning, for most of the week after the incident, all of us gravitated to that lakeshore. And we just stood there for hours.

At first, we were waiting for them.

And then, we were just waiting.

Finally, we stopped waiting. We walked off the beach....

...Changed by more than just the loss of our soul-mates.

Changed also by the new and painful understanding that any one of us could have made a difference the night before.

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And by an *inspiring* sense that, perhaps, each of us still could....

You know that beach.

You and I have been standing on that beach for a long time.

We've been waiting for a long time.

Tonight, we are walking *off* that beach... together.

Thank you.