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Scoutmaster Robert Geier, center, with Boy Scouts, clockwise from bottom left, Ray Batra, Ryan Hibbs, Peter Zekany, and Reggie Thornton, who sport medals they received for helping to rescue a family whose raft capsized on a Pennsylvania river during a summer hailstorm.

Scouts help save capsized family

BY JO MATHIS
The Ann Arbor News

Four Boy Scouts from Ann Arbor helped save a family from possible drowning in a whitewater river after a sudden thunderstorm capsized the family's boat.

The Scouts from St. Thomas the Apostle School received a "Good Save" from their troop. The award honors boys who have acted in timely defense of life or property. They have also been nominated for a national award for heroism from the Boy Scouts of America.

"We worked real hard with the boys to be

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In a storm, raft hit a rock, flipped, and pinned family

alert and capable outdoorsmen and they did us proud," said Bob Geier, St. Thomas' scouting coordinator.

On Aug. 2, Ryan Hibbs, 15, Reggie Thornton, 14, Ray Batra, 15, and Peter Zekany, 14, were participating in a whitewater kayak clinic on the final day of a two-week troop camping trip.

The boys were paddling the Middle Youghiogheny River in southeastern Pennsylvania when the area was hit by a sudden storm with gusting wind, horizontal upstream rain, and hail, Geier said.

As the Scouts were paddling the last rapid down to the takeout, they were near a family of four on a self-guided float down the river in an inflatable raft. The family lost control of the raft in the storm and hit a large rock, flipping

the raft and pinning them in the undercut.

Hibbs led the effort, rescuing the father, who told the Scouts that none of the family members knew how to swim, and urged them to rescue his wife and children. Hibbs had the father grab Zekany's boat so that he could assist the rest of the family.

Thornton and Batra rescued the two children. Together with Zekany, they towed the victims to shore through the rapids and downriver to the takeout area about 300 yards downstream and across the current.

"We weren't really scared that things wouldn't turn out," said Batra. "We knew we were pretty close to the takeout point on the river. But the storm came on so quickly and it was so intense, and

then of course the family was very freaked out when their raft went over.

"The family was very freaked out, especially after they got on land. None of us had picked up the mother because we couldn't reach her, and they were very freaked out for the mom."

Paddling upstream, Geier found the mother, who had been swept free of the pinned raft, and washed near enough to shore by the current to be rescued by cyclists who had responded to her shouts for help.

Geier said he doesn't know what would have happened to the family had the Scouts not been there. They were wearing guide-issued life jackets, but jackets can come off, and they don't always prevent drowning, he said.

Just last month, a teenage girl wearing a life jacket drowned in that same river after her kayak overturned. Her death was the second at that rapid in nine days and the third that summer at the site. "People don't always appreciate how powerful and dangerous water can be, even if it's fun," he said.

The rescued family was dressed only in bathing suits. The Scouts wore insulated layers and helmets to protect them from rocks.

Minutes after the rescue, another group of kids on rafts ended their trip shivering and crying because of the storm. The Scouts helped them, too, Geier said.

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