

Slide survivor speaks



KRISTIN MURPHY/PARK RECORD

Snyderville Basin resident Samantha Zilvitis hugs her son Max Thursday at her home in Silver Springs. The 11-year-old was buried in an **avalanche** Dec. 23 at The **Canyons** and survived. The slide killed a 30-year-old Colorado man, but Zilvitis was rescued after he was trapped underneath snow for almost 30 minutes. He returned home to celebrate Christmas with his parents and younger sister on Wednesday.

Boy, 11, describes the 'snow roller coaster' that overcame him

By **PATRICK PARKINSON**

Of the Record staff

"I saw the snow coming down the hill and then I got hit," 11-year-old Max Zilvitis said.

The boy was skiing near the Ninety-Nine 90 lift at The Canyons Dec. 23 when a roughly 175-foot-wide chunk of snow broke loose around 11:15 a.m. The avalanche killed 30-year-old Jesse R. Williams, who was a volunteer ski patrolman from Grand Junction, Colo.

Zilvitis was blue when he was pulled from underneath the pile of icy snow.

"All I could think about were all the hundreds of conversations that we're in the middle of that we might not get to finish," said Max's father Brian Zilvitis, who was also trapped in the slide.

According to Max, "I moved my head and arms around a lot ... I felt like I went upside down and I was covered in snow."

The boy was trapped for about 39 minutes, his father explained.

"I don't remember anything after getting buried in the snow," Max said, adding that he didn't wake up at the hospital until the next day.

Max said he recalls sitting down to rest near the center of the run when his dad yelled "avalanche."

"It was intended to be our last run of the day," said Brian, who was buried in the slide up to his waist. "I just remember the pressure building up my legs and up my back and then it stopped ...

It seemed surreal."

Snow from the slide covered the hillside and "when I didn't see [Max], I said the chances of me getting him alone are just too low," the father added.

So he called for help.

"I would not want to listen to how I sounded on that 911 call because I'm sure it was disastrous. It was the worst feeling in my life," Brian said.

Skiers stopped to help, but until patrollers arrived, the rescue party was disorganized, Brian said, adding that people used ski poles to probe for his son.

The boy's body was recovered in a gully about 40 yards from where Max was last seen, he added.

"[Patrollers] distributed probes and set up a line at the very bottom of the slide and one further up the slide," Brian said.

A teenage girl probing next to him discovered Max buried in the snow.

"I thanked her on the way out but I don't know who she was," the father said.

Max was immediately administered CPR then loaded in a helicopter and flown to the Primary Children's Medical Center.

"I was blowing on his hand trying to warm him up," Brian said.

Max's body temperature dropped significantly so doctors slowly began helping the boy heat up.

But for 24 hours his temperature was kept a few degree below normal to prevent his brain from swelling, Max's mother Samantha Zilvitis said.

"All I could think about were all the hundreds of conversations that we're in the middle of that we might not get to finish."

**- Brian Zilvitis
Father**

Boy survives avalanche

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"After that 24 hours they very slowly began raising his body temperature," she said. "They allowed him to raise his body temperature himself."

Max regained consciousness in the afternoon Christmas Eve.

The first question he asked was, "what happened to me?" his mother said.

"Then he said, 'where are my skis, where's my pass, where are my boots and where is my Burton ski jacket and pants?'" Samantha said, adding that the clothing was cut from his body. "It was pretty awesome."

Max still gets dizzy and doctors are treating him for a possible concussion. He suffered a minor hand injury in the accident but otherwise is fine, his mother said proudly.

"Max is a rock star for going through all of this and being incredible when he woke up, asking questions and talking," Samantha beamed. "We thank the ski patrol and the volunteers there for doing such a great job finding him in the snow."

At the hospital things couldn't have gone more smoothly, she said about her son's miraculous recovery.

"It's such a random thing, because if they had gone a few sec-

onds earlier they would have been already down," Samantha said. "If they had waited 30 seconds, they would have been higher and would have gotten badly caught in [the avalanche]."

A skier since he was three, Max said he is excited to get back on the slopes. But first he must prepare to return to Parley's Park Elementary School in Silver Springs.

Brian said a Discovery Channel special his son watched about avalanches might have helped save his life.

"Something flashed in his mind to make that space," Brian Zilvitis said.

Max said he learned Thursday that a man died in the avalanche.

"Avalanches are scary things and they can kill people," the boy lamented.

Brian expressed condolences.

"We do feel very, very sad about that and our hearts do go out to his friends and family," he said.

Max's younger sister Abby was lonely without her brother.

"I'm really glad that he's back because it's really boring without somebody," she said about Max.

The boy hopes to meet the people who helped save him at The Canyons on Sunday.

"They know more about what happened to me than I do," Max said.

Slide kills man at The Canyons

Avalanche was 'all in bounds,' forecaster says

By **PATRICK PARKINSON**

Of the Record staff

A Sunday **avalanche** at The Canyons killed a Colorado man and critically injured an 11-year-old boy who were skiing in the vicinity of an expert run called Red Pine Chutes, an **avalanche** forecaster said.

"The **avalanche** was all in bounds," Utah **Avalanche** Center forecaster Drew Hardesty said in a telephone interview Monday.

The slide occurred at 11:17 a.m. south of the Square Top peak and was 175 feet wide and between three and five feet deep, Hardesty said.

"[Patrollers] know the area intimately and they went out and threw 170 pounds of explosives on that slope the day before, and they felt good about it so they opened it," he said about the Ninety-Nine 90 lift at The Canyons, which accesses Red Pine Chutes.

The man killed in the **avalanche** was 30-year-old Jesse R. Williams, of Grand

Junction, Colo., said Bill Bruchak, ski patrol director at the Powderhorn ski resort in Colorado, where Williams worked as a volunteer ski patroller.

"[Williams] was an awesome guy, an awesome father and an awesome husband," Bruchak said Monday.

Williams was likely skiing with two friends when the group triggered the slide near the top of the run, Hardesty explained, adding that several people may have witnessed the **avalanche**.

"There were three that were caught and one of those guys hit a tree and died. There were some thoughts that they had been in the backcountry and ducked back in bounds and triggered the slide," he said. "Down at the bottom was a father and son. The father was partially buried and the son was completely buried."

The man's body was recovered from the slide within a few minutes of ski patrollers arriving on scene, according to The Canyons spokeswoman Libby Dowd, who added that the boy was rescued almost 30 minutes later.

The boy's condition was beginning to stabilize at

Primary Children's Medical Center on Monday, said Summit County Sheriff Dave Edmunds, who wouldn't release the name

'06-'07 UTAH AVALANCHE FACTS:

88 human-triggered **avalanches**; 43 people were caught in **avalanches** in Utah; 17 people were buried or partially buried; nine victims were injured and four were killed; four Utahns also died in **avalanches** in Idaho, Montana and Alaska

Source: www.utahavalanchecenter.com



KRISTIN MURPHY/PARK RECORD

Canyons ski patroller J. Guffey carries a load of probe poles to a ski patrol shack at the top of the Tombstone Express chairlift Sunday.

of the Utah child.

Edmunds said the boy is not related to the man who died in the **avalanche**.

The Canyons Managing Director Mike Goar said the area where the slide occurred was "skied heavily" on Saturday.

"We certainly felt safe today to open it," Goar told reporters Sunday. "Conditions change sometimes by the

minute."

But an **avalanche** fatality within the boundaries of a ski resort is extremely rare, Edmunds said.

"It never happens," Hardesty concurred. "It's just a tragic, tragic situation."

People skiing within the boundaries of a resort are not expected to carry **avalanche**

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Child trapped in deadly avalanche

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rescue equipment, he said.

"We don't rate the danger for the ski areas," Hardesty said.

But avalanche danger in the backcountry Sunday was considerable, according to forecasters.

The death was the first avalanche fatality in Utah this season, Hardesty said.

"The event today is a rare and unfortunate accident," Goar said in a press release. "Our thoughts and prayers go out to the families and everyone involved."

Meanwhile, Wolf Mountain Resorts Managing Partner Kenny Griswold owns most of the ski terrain at the resort that he leases to The Canyons, which is owned by the embattled American Skiing Company.

With officials at the resort entwined in several high-profile lawsuits and an ownership dispute, Griswold said the staff was not prepared to operate the resort safely this year.

"This has always been my worst fear, that the resort would not be equipped to open up safely this season," Griswold claimed in a telephone interview from his home in Southern California. "There is nothing more important than the safety of our guests. If [The Canyons does not] have the proper experience and staff, they should not be running the resort."

But American Skiing Co. President and Chief Executive Officer B.J. Fair rejected Griswold's allegations.

"It's a ridiculous statement," Fair said about Griswold's claim that a "skeleton crew" is operating The Canyons.