

Icy rescue: 'Never so scared in my life'

By ROBERT FREDERICKS
and RICHARD WEIZEL
Post staff writers

FAIRFIELD — Gary Azarian said he didn't hesitate when he jumped into Gould Manor Pond to try to save a drowning classmate even though the water was bitter cold and he doesn't consider himself a strong swimmer.

"I didn't really think too much about it at the time; I took off my sneakers and jacket and jumped in," said the 17-year-old student.

It was about 8:45 Wednesday

evening when Azarian's classmate at Andrew Warde High School, 18-year-old David Gasso, slipped below the murky surface of the small pond near High Street and disappeared into about 12 feet of water.

Kim Tkalecz of 240 Mayfair Road, another friend and classmate who had tried to help the foundering teen, had been trying to hold Gasso above the water but lost her grip.

Gasso, of 30 Raymond Circle, had jumped into the pond himself after his German shepherd, Nokoma, chased a frisbee and became entangled on some debris just below the

surface.

Azarian, recalling the rescue from his 192 Hawthorne Drive home this morning, said that Gasso and Tkalecz, 16, were tossing a frisbee in a parking lot near the pond, which is near several ballfields and is a popular hangout for neighborhood kids.

"The frisbee went into the pond and Nokoma wanted to go fetch it. He swam out there but got caught on something; he was swimming, but he wasn't moving anywhere. Then he started crying," said Azarian.

"Kim said to let her go cause she's a strong swimmer, but (Gasso) took

off his shirt and went in" after his dog.

Then, about 25 or 30 feet from shore, Gasso apparently cut his side on something. The pond, Azarian said, is full of branches and other debris just below the surface.

"He went over on his side; he was holding onto his side and stopped swimming," he said.

At that point Tkalecz jumped in to help, but didn't have the strength to hold onto the heavier youth.

"She grabbed his arm but it slipped away," Azarian said. The girl then made her way back to shore

with the dog in tow. At that point, Azarian said he jumped in to try to save the stricken teen.

"He went right down; he must have taken in a lot of water all ready," he said. "Oh God, I was never so scared in my life! I couldn't see anything. I dove under and just searched around with my hands."

On his second dive below the surface, Azarian said he felt Gasso's arm and grabbed hold. He then dragged him to the surface and toward shore, where a crowd of anxious

(Continued on Page Six)

Drowning averted as friends rescue teen

(Continued from Page One)

teenagers had gathered.

"I yelled for somebody to get an ambulance because he wasn't breathing; he looked dead. A friend of mine, Steve Mitzos, got in his car and went for help. Then all of a sudden his stomach started to move and he woke up. He thought it was a dream; he kept asking 'Is this real? Did this really happen?'"

An ambulance arrived, then another, along with several police cars. According to a spokesman for the Ace Ambulance Co., the teenager was awake and talking when rescue workers arrived.

Gasso rode to Bridgeport Hospital in one ambulance while Azarian and Tkalecz rode in another.

Gasso, suffering from pneumo-

nia, was listed in fair condition this morning in the hospital's intensive care unit, according to a hospital spokeswoman. The other two teens were treated and released from the hospital.

"He asked me for a hamburger last night, so he must be getting better if he's got an appetite," his mother, Jean Gasso, said today. "He ate the whole thing."

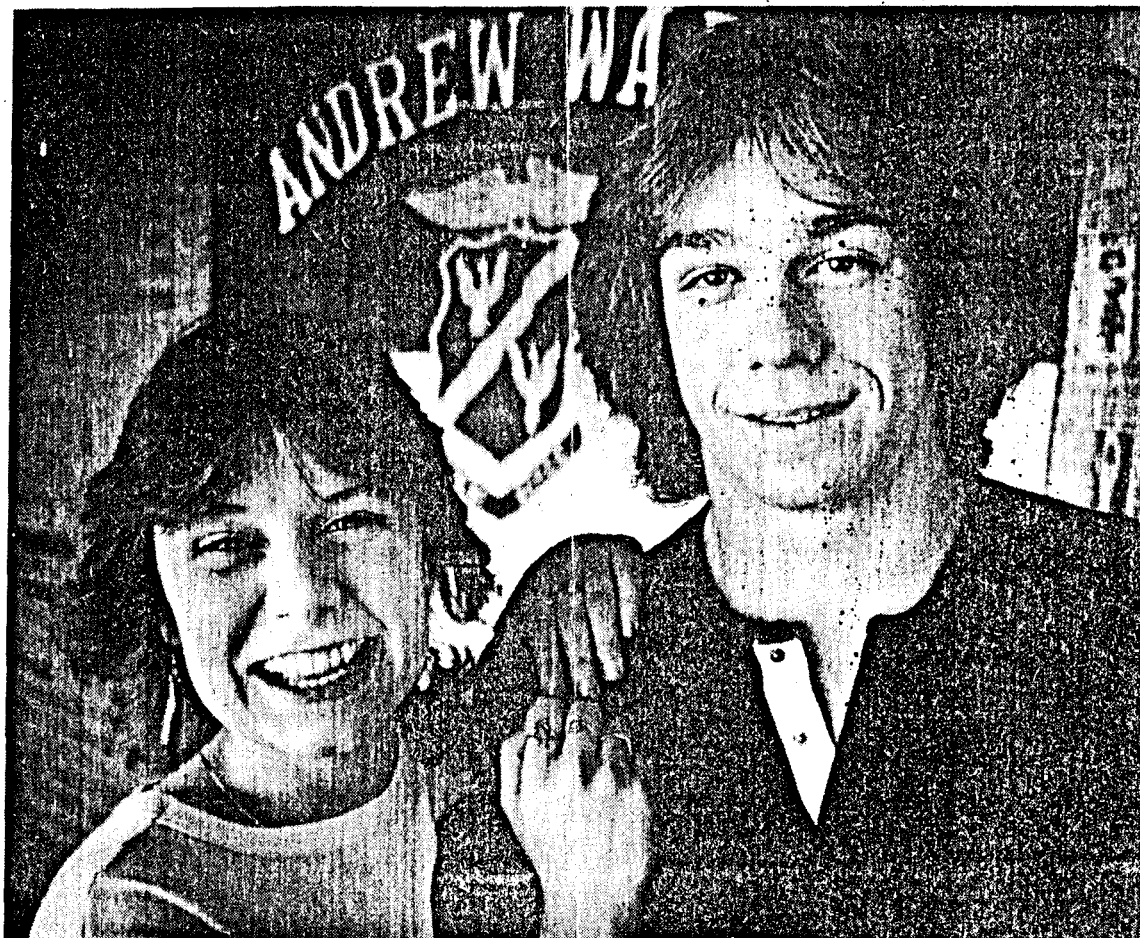
Describing herself as relieved but still shaken, the woman said she wasn't surprised to hear that David had jumped into the water after his dog even though he never had taken swimming lessons and wasn't a strong swimmer.

"He loves that dog," she said of the 1½-year-old shepherd.

Mrs. Gasso said she was helping her daughter with her homework when two boys burst into her home to tell her what had happened. They drove her to the scene, and she followed the ambulance in which David, the youngest of her four sons, was riding.

"He seemed better last night; he told me not to worry, to go home and that he'd be all right," she said.

Mrs. Gasso said she didn't know how to thank the kids who saved her son. "I'm just so grateful he's alive," she said.



Post photo — Wayne Ratzenberger

Kim Tkalecz and Gary Azarian get together at Andrew Warde High School in Fairfield.

State lottery

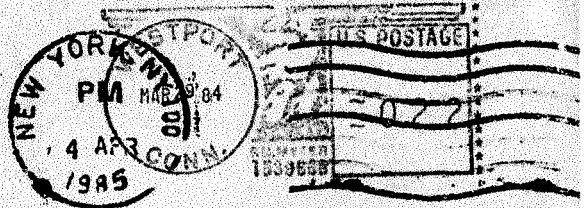
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March 14 — 889
Play Four — 7192
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Lucky color — Red
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Letter to Gary

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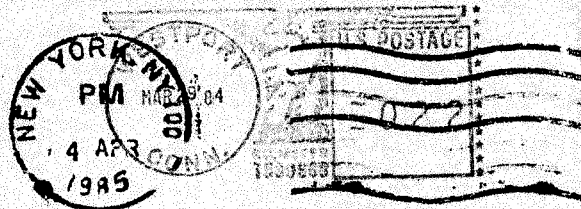
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ATTN: BISHOP MANOOGIAN Primate

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