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News

# Teen dies on wilderness trek run by Oregon-based camp

06/21/02

**STEVE LUNDGREN**

A 15-year-old Arizona girl died May 27 after hiking with an Oregon-based wilderness therapy program in the mountains north of Tonopah, Nev., a spokesman for the program confirmed.

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It's the first death of a teenager enrolled in the Catherine Freer Wilderness Expeditions, which was featured May 23 on "Primetime Thursday," an ABC News production.

Authorities in Nye County, Nev., said an autopsy has been done, but they are waiting for toxicology and pathology tests before they release a cause of death. Authorities refused to identify the girl.

Paul Smith, program director for the Catherine Freer program, headquartered in Albany, said the coroner told school officials there was "no observable cause of death." He also said the girl had a history of substance abuse and may have had a congenital heart defect.

Smith said the girl collapsed about an hour after she hiked three miles into the mountains in or near the Arc Dome Wilderness in central Nevada.

"It was the very first day of a trip, they had just started the backpacking portion of the trip," Smith said. "They had been in camp for over an hour and were collecting water in their canteens."

He said the girl was sitting when she collapsed.

The camp counselors started resuscitation efforts and called for help on a satellite telephone, Smith said. A helicopter ambulance flew her to a

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hospital in Fallon, Nev., where she was pronounced dead on arrival.

The Nye County sheriff's department is investigating the death, but officials would not say what they have learned and won't release information until the coroner's report is complete.

Lt. Tony Philips said the temperature was in the 70s and the students had water during their hike.

Rob Cooley, also with Catherine Freer in Albany, said students have a routine physical from their own doctors before entering the programs.

He said the incident was the first serious medical emergency for the Catherine Freer program that started in 1988.

Catherine Freer is one of four wilderness schools operating in Oregon. The 2001 Legislature passed a law to license and regulate the schools after a teen-ager died while on an outing with the Bend-based Obsidian Trails Outdoor School in September 2000.

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