

# Program gives boaters a lifeline

Kiosks lend free life jackets for the day

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**SENECA** — Two years ago, Craig Keese of Simpsonville lost his son and grandson, who drowned when their boat cap-



Keese

son and grandson went out on Lake Stockton to fish.

sized on a Missouri lake while fishing.

It was March 27, 2010, a warm and sunny day, much like the past few days in the Upstate, Keese said Tuesday. His

They hadn't been on the water long when an unexpected storm came up. Waves tossed the small 14-foot boat about and it capsized, Keese said.

"Life jackets were in the boat. For whatever reason, they didn't have them on that day," Keese said.

Divers searched the large Missouri lake for 45 days before they found the father and 60 days

before they found the son. The Keese family knew that the two usually wore their life jackets and were at a loss as to why they didn't have them on that day.

Keese now is a man on a mission to spread the word on the urgency of wearing life jackets and to make them available. It can save lives, he said.

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The Keese family has started a foundation to create a life jacket loaner program. The family started a program in Missouri and marked the second anniversary of their tragedy by unveiling the first of hopefully many life jacket loaner kiosks across South Carolina.

The kiosk at South Cove Park on Lake Keowee near Seneca bears a photograph of the smiling face of Keese's grandson, a row of loaner life jackets in various sizes available for the day at no charge, and the words, "Kids don't float. Give them something that does."

The message is blunt. So is Keese. Like seat belts, life jackets should be mandatory on the water, he said.

"The tragedy of life jackets and boating is tremendous," Keese said. "Last year 700 people died in boating accidents, the majority of which could have been prevented had they had their life jacket on."

Using the honor system, park visitors can check out life jackets and are asked to return them the same day so they are always available for anyone who needs one, said Phil Shirley, Oconee parks director.

Duke Energy, Safe Kids Upstate, the Friends of Lake Keowee Society and the Keese Foundation paid for construction of the kiosk sign and shelter, and the South Carolina Depart-

ment of Natural Resources is providing the life jackets.

Plans are to install kiosks at other swimming and boating areas on Lake Keowee and the Chauga River in Oconee County and then expand to other South Carolina waters.

The goals of the program are to educate boaters on the importance of wearing life jackets, to provide loaner life jackets for families and to keep children and families safe on the water, said Deby Snipes, special project co-

ordinator with Safe Kids Upstate.

Drowning is the leading cause of death for children between the ages of one and four, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Three children die every day in the U.S. as a result of drowning.

Life jackets come in various sizes to fit children of different ages, and it's important to have the right size so that the jacket will keep the child's head above the water and not come off, said Sgt. Ron Winegard of

the state Department of Natural Resources.

Adult life jackets won't protect children, Winegard said. Using his 9-year-old daughter as a model, he put an adult life jacket on her and fastened it snugly.

When she raised her arms like a drowning victim would tend to do, Winegard easily lifted the jacket up and off her, demonstrating how an adult jacket would float on the surface while a drowning child would slip out of it and drop below the surface.