

Rescue

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Illinois, both survived and went home safely after receiving medical attention on the beach.

Djurdjulov, 20, let the adrenaline slow down before she paused to reflect on what just happened. While trying not to feel self-absorbed, she acknowledged that she just executed something pretty special.

"It felt really good, honestly," she said. "It's the proudest I've ever been of myself."

With 45 lifeguards patrolling a dozen beaches and another 40 crew members on boats and elsewhere around Geneva Lake, the Water Safety Patrol records about 15 rescues each summer, on average. But few are as dramatic as Djurdjulov's single-handed rescue of a 12-year-old girl and her 37-year-old mother in the middle of a capacity crowd on one of the year's busiest days at the beaches.

Her father, Milanko Djurdjulov, said it is no surprise to those who know her that Sofija would sacrifice her own safety to dive into a dangerous situation and help others.

Growing up in Lake Geneva, Sofija was always one to challenge herself physically and to push herself to the limit of risky circumstances, her father said.

"She's always looked to try to strive to be better than she can," he said. "She defi-



Sofija Djurdjulov walks a pier at George Williams College in Williams Bay, which is one of a dozen sites around Geneva Lake protected by Water Safety Patrol lifeguards. (Photo by Scott Williams/Regional News)

nately has the drive."

Djurdjulov devoted most of her childhood to studying gymnastics and martial arts. She also learned to swim at a young age by taking classes with the Water Safety Patrol.

After graduating from Badger High School in 2016, she decided to try working as a lifeguard. With an older brother who had previously worked with the Water Safety Patrol, she always found the job appealing.

On the Fourth of July, she was one of eight lifeguards stationed at Riviera Beach, the busiest beach on the lake. Temperatures were in the 90s, so the beach was packed, and lots of people were splashing around in the water.

Djurdjulov was stan-

ding on an offshore pier when she heard the 12-year-old girl scream for help. Officials believe the girl had been heading toward the pier, but panicked when she reached a drop-off and the lake bottom fell out from under her.

When Djurdjulov reached the girl, she was surprised to find the mother there, too, face down with her hair floating on the surface.

"I thought, 'Oh, my god, there's another person,'" she said. "With all the adrenaline, it happens so fast. You just have to do it."

Wrapping an arm around each victim, the 5-foot-4 Djurdjulov hoisted everyone above the surface, then lay back on her flotation device and foot-pad-

dled back to shore. There, other Water Safety Patrol lifeguards and an ambulance crew tended to the victims.

Djurdjulov said the experience has left her with two lasting impressions: First, she wishes everyone would take swimming lessons. Secondly, she is considering advanced training so she can perhaps pursue a career as a paramedic.

Holding in her hands the lives of two people who could have died that day, she said, has opened her eyes to the reality of why lifeguards and other emergency responders are on duty.

"It really now makes sense to me," she said. "I'm so glad I was right there."