

Remains found in sunken boat in Keys by tech divers believed to be Noah Cullen

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Several miles off the coast of Key Largo, in dark and cold water more than 300 feet below the surface, two volunteer technical divers made the dangerous descent to a sunken sailboat in search of its missing captain, 24-year-old Noah Cullen.

The divers, Joe Citelli and Steve Muslin, found what is believed to be human remains inside the cabin and retrieved a small sample to be analyzed. While positive identification through DNA could take months, Monroe County Sheriff's Office investigator Vince Weiner said, "There is no indication it is anybody but him."

Cullen's mother, Tanya Cleary, said Monday she believes it is the remains of her son. He has been missing since Aug. 4, when a boater spotted his 28-foot sailboat sinking after a storm, and Cleary said she is beginning the grieving process.

“We wanted closure, but this is also extremely painful,” Cleary said. “We’ve had such a strange seven weeks going through this. We even had a person come to us saying Noah was in the witness protection program, which is crazy.”

The last tweet posted on Cullen’s Twitter account @bathyphile came on the morning of his disappearance. It said: “Noah Cullen is dropping out for a bit #sailing #bathyphile #offshore.”

There also were tips that Cullen, a 2008 graduate of Coral Shores High School, may be in the Bahamas.

“We had a lot of reasons to hope, only to be let down,” Cleary said. “So it’s bittersweet to find his body in the boat, although we probably always have known he was in there.”

The tragedy began on a nice Monday morning, when Cullen decided to take his sailboat to the reef to go free diving. He had tried to get friends to go with him but ended up going by himself.

He set sail from his mother’s house, near mile marker 100 of the Overseas Highway, and a few hours later was spotted at noon at French Reef by a boat captain with Quiescence Dive Center.

Cullen had just finished free diving and began sailing toward shore. “The captain watching him was impressed with his [sailing] abilities,” Rob Bleser, captain of the Key Largo Volunteer Fire Department’s Water Emergency Team, said at the time.

That would be the last time Cullen was seen alive. About an hour after he was seen leaving French Reef, a storm rolled in with lightning, heavy rains and winds of up to 25 knots.

After the storm passed, at about 2:30 p.m., the boater spotted the sinking sailboat near Dixie Shoal, about seven nautical miles northwest of Molasses Reef. No signs of life on board were evident. The boater took a photograph, alerted authorities and left the area.

A massive air and sea search was launched. The U.S. Coast Guard and local and state agencies, as well as a small army of volunteers, covered about 5,000 nautical square miles over several days. While the official search was called off, the Upper Keys dive community did not give up.

“Noah was a member of the dive community, his stepfather co-owns one of the local dive shops and we take care of our own,” Bleser said.

The first step was finding the sailboat. A sonar scan conducted near the last known sighting of Cullen’s boat showed what appeared to be a boat just 80 yards away, but this proved not to be the case.

Bleser thought that the boat likely sank before the Coast Guard began its aerial search. Starting with the last known point, he calculated a model based on the direction, flow and speed of the current.

“I figured the maximum distance it could have traveled was 9,500 feet,” he said.

On the third attempt using this model, sonar from a private boat detected what appeared to be a sailboat about 5,800 feet from the last sighting of the sailboat, Bleser said.

Next came positively identifying the boat as the Jubilee. For this mission, a remotely operated underwater vehicle was borrowed from Lad Akins, head of the Key Largo-based Reef Environmental Education Foundation.

At the end of August, Bleser and his stepson sent the ROV down to the wreck and made the confirmation.

The final step was getting tech divers who were willing to make the risky dive. That led to Citelli and Muslin, who have about 50 years of combined experience.

Said Citelli: “When I heard the kid’s age, I said to myself, ‘This could be my son or my grandson. I know how I would feel in the position of those parents.’ Steve and I thought it was important to get it done.”

Citelli, whose impressive diving résumé includes a 430-foot dive 140 miles offshore to identify the shipwreck Joseph M. Cudahy, said he also didn't want to have less-experienced tech divers push their limits and have it turn into a "double disaster."

Citelli and Muslin both used rebreathers, a closed circuit system in which exhaled gases are scrubbed of carbon dioxide and replenished with fresh oxygen so the mixture can be breathed again. Mixed gases are used because air becomes toxic below 218 feet, Citelli said.

Each diver also had two "bailout bottles" with different mixes for different depths. "The cardinal rule is always to have an alternate source," Citelli said. "The deeper you go, the greater the risk. Once you get to the 300-foot range, there is very little margin for error."

There were safety divers on the boat, as well as a hyperbaric physician.

The two men made the descent and spent 18 minutes on the bottom. They were expecting water temperatures in the 80s, but they encountered 64 degrees.

They surveyed the boat, taking video and collecting the tissue sample before making the ascent, which included about an hour of decompression stops along the way for total dive times of just over 80 minutes.

"It was a very dangerous operation for them and we're just extremely grateful," Cleary said.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission will use the video to help in its investigation of the boat fatality, and the Monroe County Sheriff's Office will use it for its missing persons case.

The tissue sample was brought to the medical examiner's office in Monroe County to ensure it was human remains before it will be transported to another agency for DNA testing. But the medical examiner will not be able to determine cause of death.

“And I doubt we’ll ever know the true reason why the boat sank,” said Bobby Dube, spokesman for FWC. “It probably was from the storm. There are many theories. Some think it was probably struck by lightning.”

That theory could also mean that Cullen was either killed instantly or rendered unconscious and not able to escape from the boat before it sank.

Due to the dangerous depth, there are no plans to return to the boat. His family is at peace knowing Cullen’s final resting spot is in a place he loved.

“I’d just like Noah to be remembered as someone who loved the water and was a passionate defender of the unique environment of the Keys,” Cleary said.