

Meet RJ Hayman, an Ocean City lifeguard who rescued an endangered teen



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[Lucas Gonzalez](#), Salisbury Daily Times Published 7:00 a.m. ET Aug. 28, 2019

Tourists and locals, pay attention. This could save your life. NOAA, USA Today Network

Whether it's between tropical storms, sharks, or even flying beach umbrellas, there are several potential dangers near the ocean.

But it's not every day that a beach trip can become a matter of life or death.

As a fourth-year lifeguard with Ocean City Beach Patrol, 21-year-old crew captain Russell "RJ" Hayman has seen firsthand how casual fun at the beach can quickly turn life-threatening.

"It's a lot of responsibility," Hayman said. "If you let yourself slack off for even one second, you're putting someone's life in jeopardy."

RJ Hayman (center) is one of several Ocean City Beach Patrol lifeguards who helped rescue a teenager after a life-threatening accident in July. (Photo: Image courtesy of RJ Hayman)

Hayman was one of several lifeguards who responded July 4 when 19-year-old Ben Paepcke dove headfirst into shallow water, instantly paralyzing him.

At the time, Hayman recalled he was training freshman lifeguard Matt Egley. Upon witnessing the incident, the pair immediately took charge of the situation.

It's uncommon for that many guards to be in the same place at once, according to Hayman — but for Paepcke, it was extremely fortunate.

"In the worst scenario possible, Ben had the best situation," Hayman said. "If he had stayed face-down like that for any longer than he was, he probably would have started taking in water."

Once they reached Paepcke, the guards flipped him over and placed his arms behind his head to prevent further neck injury. They then moved him onto the shore where he stayed until emergency personnel arrived.

The immediacy that comes with lifeguard duty is not just routine for Hayman; it's what drives him.

Hayman is also studying at the University of Maryland Eastern Shore to become a pilot — a career path which, like lifeguarding, he pursued just as his father once did.

"I like the adrenaline rush of it all, Hayman said. "I like having that factor that every day you've got to bring your A-game."

RJ Hayman stands atop a lifeguard stand in Ocean City. (Photo: Image courtesy of RJ Hayman)

Since he helped rescue Paepcke, Hayman said he's stayed in touch with the family and continues to monitor a [GoFundMe](#) page to track the paralyzed teen's progress.

Hayman has also helped raise money for the family by selling bracelets which read "prayers for Pap." He and his crew still wear their bracelets, he said.

Doctors said Paepcke suffered a traumatic spinal injury after shattering his C5 vertebrae. As of Friday, Paepcke is being treated at a rehabilitation facility in Colorado, according to a Facebook post from his mother. It's not clear how soon he will recover.

"I'm hoping he has the best path to recovery possible," Hayman said.