



# Brownsville principal helps rescue swimmer off South Padre Island

By [Gary Long](#) - May 1, 2024

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Sunday, April 28, 2024, was a red flag day at Isla Blanca Park on South Padre Island. (Courtesy photo)

A quick response by the Cameron County Beach Patrol resulted in the rescue of a distressed swimmer who got caught in a rip current Sunday afternoon near the jetties off South Padre Island.

Jayden Crews and Kallyia Saenz spotted the swimmer about 5 p.m. Crews swam to him about 50 yards offshore while Saenz watched with binoculars from shore, beach patrol chief Art Hurtado said Wednesday.

The scene developed right in front of Michael Moreno, a surfer who life-guarded in Austin as a college student and who was heading out to a second surf session at a spot he had surfed earlier in the day.

Moreno left his board on the beach patrol truck and swam out to help bring in the distressed swimmer, who recovered and left the area without needing further assistance, Hurtado said.

"It was a lot of undertow, high waves, low tide," Moreno said.

"So I approached and he had already made contact with the swimmer. He had his buoy that he had wrapped around his chest. ... Between the two of us we began to slowly get him back to land," Moreno said.

As they came in, waves were breaking over their heads, adding to the scene's intensity, Moreno, the principal at Perez Elementary, said.

The rescue came as the Cameron County Beach Patrol heads into its busiest time of the season, the period from Memorial Day to Labor Day.

Guard stands go up on Memorial Day as temperatures and attendance at county beaches soar.

"It was a strong rip current day. We had our red flags up. We have a flag warning system. We have a unit dedicated to Isla Blanca Park. They work as a team, one in the water, one keeping lookout, and we have a system of hand signals, because you cannot hear each other while you're in the water," Hurtado said.

"That swimmer was right next to the jetties, which actually is our no-swim zone. We advise people to stay out of that area and avoid getting in rip currents. It's a well-known dangerous area because the jetties create a permanent rip current," he said.

Hurtado clarified that rip currents do not pull swimmers down, but rather out to sea.

"All they do is take you far out, and people start swimming against it and they get tired," he said.

Hurtado said the beach patrol's focus is on informing the public about dangers associated with rip currents.

"Rescue is secondary. Our guards are taught to spot trouble areas, to make contact ahead of time before people get in trouble, to stop things before they happen. ... You're going to save way more lives with prevention than rescue and also it's a risk to ourselves every time we go into the water," he said.

As far as getting caught in one, all you have to do is stay calm and float. Eventually (the rip current) does dissipate. If you do feel the need to get out, you swim parallel to the shoreline. That bottleneck is only so wide," Hurtado said.

Concerning the rescued swimmer, "my staff did suspect that he was intoxicated, which is a very common issue out here. ... We have no way to evaluate because he left after he got rescued. It's very dangerous," Hurtado added.

The Cameron County Beach Patrol is under U.S. Lifesaving Association.

"It's the gold standard for every open-water area in the nation. We submit statistics and generally, males to females ages 5-50 drown at a rate of 5-1. Men are five times more likely to get in trouble, and to drown as well in the open water setting," Hurtado said.

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Hurtado's agency is looking for swimmers age 16 and up who can swim 500 yards in 10 minutes or less to work as ocean lifeguards during the summer season. Starting pay is \$16 per hour, with paid training and certifications.

Hurtado also sponsors an open-water swimming group. The group swims together during the summer.

**Gary Long**