

Family survives plunge into American River

By Richard Sharp, KCRA-TV

A Livermore family traveling through the Sierra on Friday is lucky to be alive after their SUV veered off the road, hit a concrete mile marker, a large tree, a boulder and landed in the middle of the South Fork of the American River.

“It was fortuitous that they didn’t actually land on me,” said Mark Devittorio, a kayaker who was in the river when the crash happened. “I was kayaking right there moments before they plunged off the cliff.”

Devittorio rushed to help.



Mark Devittorio was kayaking in the American River when an SUV went off a cliff and landed near him in the river.

Photo/Mark Divittorio via KCRA

He found three children standing on the vehicle. They had managed to unbuckle their seat belts.

He helped the children to the side of the river and went back

to help the driver and his wife.

Devittorio found the driver pinned upside down with his head partly underwater. His wife was helping hold his head up.

“I was afraid that if I would have cut the seat belt, he would have died in front of me and his wife and his three kids,” Devittorio said.

By chance, a fire engine with swift-water trained firemen was nearby after returning from another call.

What would have been a 15-minute response was reduced to 3 minutes. They were able to stabilize the driver while they worked to free him.

“We actually used a life jacket to put under the driver’s head and shoulders to hold his head up out of the water, while we were cutting the roof off the vehicle,” said Mike Pott, the fire marshal of the El Dorado County Fire Protection District.

All five family members were taken to area hospitals, Pott said.

Only the driver had major injuries, the rest of the family only had bumps and bruises, Pott added.

Another factor that worked in the families favor was the river level.

“The lack of rainfall this year actually worked in favor of this family. The water wasn’t as high as it normal is and it wasn’t as swift as it normally is,” Pott said.