

By Meredith Metsker, Daily News staff writer

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A Washington State University graduate student and economics instructor died last week when he drowned in a Seattle hotel pool.

Tesfaye Deboch, 27, was swimming laps in the pool around 5:30 p.m. June 30 at the Quality Inn & Suites near the Seattle Center when he suddenly stopped in the deep end of the pool and began waving his arms for help.

Deboch's friend, Pavan Dhanireddy, said he was in the shallow end of the pool but couldn't swim very well himself, so he ran into the nearby hotel lobby yelling for help. He said a woman at the front desk called 911, but by the time the first responders arrived at the hotel, Deboch had sunk to the bottom of the murky pool.

Dhanireddy said Seattle firefighters used a long cleaning pole to search the 8-foot deep water for Deboch but found nothing. He said officials decided Deboch must have left the pool and hotel and declared him a missing person, despite his shoes, shirt, wallet and phone all still being poolside.

No one got into the pool to look for him, said his friends.

Another friend, Ryan Bain, arrived at the hotel about a half-hour after Deboch was declared missing.

Bain, Dhanireddy, Deboch and 11 other WSU graduate students in the School of Economic Sciences were in Seattle attending the Western Economics Association International Conference.

Bain said he and his colleagues were able to watch some security camera footage of the lobby, which included a limited view of the pool. He said they also called nearby hospitals, looking for Deboch. When they couldn't find him at the hospitals or on the security camera footage, they determined he must still be in the pool.

"I just had a horrible, sinking, sick feeling," Bain said.

Bain and his colleagues began searching the pool again with the pole. A retired firefighter sitting nearby heard about the situation, and asked the people still swimming in the pool to leave and asked the hotel staff to drain the pool.

Bain said the retired firefighter realized the pole was too short to reach the bottom of the deep end, so he attached a squeegee to the end of the pole and searched again. Shortly after, the man felt the pole touch Deboch's body.

Nearly three hours after the first 911 call, emergency personnel once again responded to the hotel and lifted Deboch's body out of the pool. Bain said EMTs attempted to resuscitate Deboch.

"Nobody got into the pool," Bain said of the first 911 call. "The hotel staff didn't seem to know what to do."

"It was almost insulting that when it mattered and something could have been done, nobody was rigorous enough to do the due diligence," Bain said, "yet after he had been gone for (more than) an hour, we still (saw) them trying to resuscitate him, pointlessly, when it didn't matter."

Officer Steve Espinoza, with the Seattle Police Department West Precinct, said at that point, first responders turned Deboch's body over the King County Medical Examiner.

Bill Barbour, an investigator with the medical examiner's office, said Deboch's death was ruled as an accident. Barbour said Deboch had no pre-existing conditions contributing to his death, which was identified as asphyxia due to freshwater drowning.

Rebekah Schrade, another colleague of Deboch's, said Deboch was buried by his family on Monday near his home in Ethiopia. A public memorial service will be held at 3 p.m. Friday at the Ensminger Pavilion on the WSU campus.

Schrade said the past week has been extremely difficult for the faculty, staff and students in WSU's School of Economic Sciences, where Deboch was about to enter his fourth and final year in the Ph.D. program.

Schrade described Deboch as a very ambitious, happy and loving person. She said he liked to play soccer and swim laps at the WSU Student Recreation Center and always attended Cougar basketball and football games.

She said Deboch, known to many of his friends as "T," taught several entry-level economics courses and tutored many students. Schrade said Deboch, a strong Christian, loved to introduce his friends to Ethiopian food and music.

"He was more full of life than anybody. So, if nothing else, I can be sure he really lived his 27 years to the fullest," Schrade said.

Bain and Schrade said Deboch was a leader and constant source of encouragement to his colleagues in the Ph.D. program. Bain, a Texas native, said Deboch was the closest thing to family he had in Pullman.

"I considered him a very close friend and confidante, and he was the person that when I passed all of my core examinations on my last attempt, I wept on his shoulder, and I'm not even ashamed to say that," Bain said.

Bain and Schrade said there's a lot of anger among Deboch's friends and colleagues about how the emergency situation was handled.

"Instead of being able to get to the point where I'm celebrating the time and the privilege and the opportunity to have him in my life, we're all still, in a sense, angry and confused just at the senselessness of the loss," Bain said.

A phone call to the general manager of Quality Inn & Suites was not returned Wednesday, and a public records request to the Seattle Police Department also went unanswered as of press time. A records request to the Seattle Fire Department was answered, but the records were not released Wednesday.

James Apa, a spokesman for Public Health Seattle and King County, said last year about 24 people died from preventable drowning incidents in King County, with 60 percent of those incidents taking place in open water, such as rivers, lakes, ponds or Puget Sound.

Apa said drowning can happen in a number of different environments, but incidents in hotel pools are not common.

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