

Dave Stingl was having nightmares. The veteran pool service technician in Sterling, Va., could not escape from the graphic images that were playing in his head.

“Back in 1995, I went to a party where I met this attorney and we got to talking,” Stingl recalls. “Apparently, in Baltimore there was a young boy who had been eviscerated at a Holiday Inn wading pool. When [the attorney] found out what I did for a living, he went into a two-hour dissertation about what happened.”

Stingl says the attorney’s story went into horrific detail: “He told me about the mother standing there screaming for help, how the lifeguard ran and turned off the pump — how the water then turned blood red.”

He didn’t sleep well that night. “I just kept lying there in bed thinking of ways we could solve this problem,” Stingl says. “I’ve worked on pools for 30 years, and I figured there must be some way to do it.”

The attorney’s macabre story became the inspiration for Stingl to develop the Stingl Switch, one of the first anti-suction entrap-

ment devices to hit the pool market.

While the Stingl Switch and other safety vacuum release systems are thought to be effective barriers against limb and body entrapment, whether they could prevent the most gruesome form of entrapment — evisceration — is only speculative. Evisceration happens quickly and many believe the devices would not have time to react.

For Valerie Lakey, it’s a moot point. There was no such thing as an SVRS when she was 5 years old and eviscerated by a suction outlet at a community wading pool in Medfield, N.C. Remarkably, she survived the incident and became one of the nation’s best-known entrapment victims, but it also radically changed the quality of her life forever.

“She can’t eat food like you and me,” says David Kirby, the Lakey family attorney. “She has to be fed with intravenous tubes and it has to titrate into her body 12 hours a day with a pump five times a week. “This is similar to baby food, but it’s caustic and hard on the liver. And it’s incredibly expensive. It cost

\$130,000 to 150,000 a year just to feed her.”

Lawsuits were brought against pool operators (city of Medfield), as well as Wake County, which ran the inspection programs for public pools. Hayward Pool Products, the pump manufacturer, and Sta-Rite Industries, the drain cover manufacturer also were named as defendants.

All defendants settled out of court for \$5.9 million collectively except for Sta-Rite, which went to trial and eventually was found liable for \$25 million.

The Lakeys then successfully lobbied the North Carolina legislature to pass laws requiring all new public pools have dual main drains, while existing pools be retrofitted with them.

Kirby says that if you met 14-year-old Valerie today, you’d assume she was just another good-natured teen. “She goes to school and is a good student and normal in every other way,” he says. “But when she returns home, she becomes somewhat of a pumpkin. It’s sad because she’s a great kid.”

— B.D.