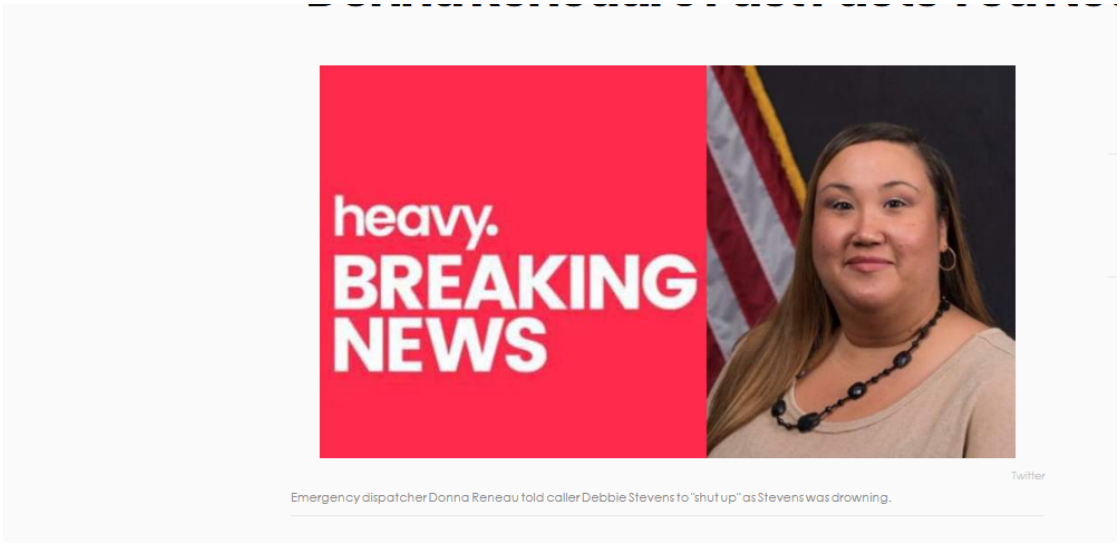
Donna Reneau: 5 Fast Facts You Need to Know

By Janet Winikoff | Heavy | Published Sep. 3, 2019 at 9:35 p.m. | Updated 9:41 p.m.



Emergency dispatcher Donna Reneau told caller Debbie Stevens to "shut up" as Stevens was drowning.

Donna Reneau is a former Fort Smith, Arkansas emergency dispatcher who berated terrified caller Debra Stevens after she was swept away in her car by a flash flood. Stevens, 47, drowned as she begged Reneau to send someone to rescue her.

“This will teach you next time don’t drive in the water,” Reneau told her during the 22-minute call.

On August 24, Stevens called 911 at 4:38 a.m. and told Reneau she’d been delivering newspapers for the Southwest Times Record when a flash flood washed her SUV off the road.

Reneau first phoned a relative and then called 911 for help. Stevens’ last words were spoken to Reneau.

1. Donna Reneau Scolded Debbie Stevens for Not Seeing the Flooded Road & Told Her She Was Going to Have To “Shut up”

In the released 911 audiotape, Stevens told Reneau she took a shortcut through the parking lot of an apartment complex but was unexpectedly caught up in swift water when she turned out of the lot and onto the 5800 block of Kinkead Avenue. During the first few seconds of the call, Stevens said she was trapped in the SUV, and water was pouring in through her windows and up to her chest. She also revealed that she didn’t know how to swim. “I can’t get out and I’m scared to death, ma’am,” Stevens said.

“Please help me. I don’t want to die,” she repeated.

For the first 10 minutes of the conversation, Reneau collected information from Stevens but seemed to become irritated as the frightened woman continued to cry and plead for help. Stevens explained again how she turned onto the road and was unexpectedly hit with floodwater.

“I’m sorry ma’am, I didn’t see it,” she said. Reneau scolded her. “I don’t see how you didn’t see it. You had to go right over it,” she said.

Stevens said she could see people watching her from apartment balconies but couldn’t understand why no one was helping. Reneau told her that other people had called 911 to report Stevens needed assistance but added,

“they’re not going to get their self in danger because you put yourself in danger.”

Stevens asked Reneau if the police would take her home after she was rescued so she could care for her dogs. She went on to say that she needed to finish delivering newspapers and upset that her car and phone would be ruined by the water. Stevens is heard crying and repeatedly apologizing to Reneau. “Thank you for being there for me, Miss Donna,” she said.

“Miss Debbie you’re going to have to shut up,” the 911 dispatcher chided Stevens as her panic increased. Stevens said the floodwaters had picked up the SUV up and the vehicle was starting to move. “Dear Lord, please just get me out, dear Lord,” Stevens cried. Within seconds, Stevens is heard screaming, “I CAN’T BREATHE! I CAN’T BREATHE! I CAN’T BREATHE!”

2. Debbie Stevens’ Call Came in during Donna Reneau’s Last Shift

According to Baker, Reneau had given the department her two weeks’ notice earlier that month and was finishing up her last shift when she received the call from Stevens. Reneau had been a dispatcher for five years and was a certified dispatch trainer for new employees. In February 2019 she was named Fire Dispatcher of the Year.

Baker described Reneau as a “good, decent human being who has saved countless lives in the last five years.” ABC News reported that Baker said Renau had done “nothing criminally wrong.”

“It is so unfortunate that her entire career will be defined by this single incident,” Baker added.

3. Dispatchers & Officers Were Attempting to Help Multiple Flash Flood Victims When Debra Stevens Called

When Stevens called, the Fort Smith Police Department staff was stretched thin. Only four dispatchers were monitoring seven 911 lines and nine officers were in the field attempting to rescue multiple from flood victims. “Also exacerbating response and rescue efforts were the facts that Mrs. Stevens was having trouble describing her exact location and flooding limited the ability of first responders to reach her,” a police department news release said.

The news release noted that Reneau’s comments may have seemed “calloused and uncaring at times,” but that “sincere efforts” had been made to locate and rescue Stevens.

The release gave a detailed timeline of events and noted that after Stevens’ car was found behind a thicket of trees at 5:02 a.m., an officer removed his duty gear, put on a life vest, and attempted to enter the current tied to a rope but was unsuccessful due to the speed and volume of the water. A rescue boat was launched at 5:16 a.m. however, first responders weren’t able to reach Stevens until 5:58 a.m.

Baker agreed that Reneau’s comments were inappropriate but said she probably wouldn’t have been fired if she’d stayed on the job.

He said the manner of speaking would probably have been addressed as a rudeness or quality-of-service complaint and would not have risen to the level of termination.

Captain Wes Milam described Reneau’s tone with Stevens as “uncharacteristic” of her as a police dispatcher.

Baker said his department fields rudeness complaints daily and he won’t tolerate disrespectful behavior from employees. “I don’t want us interacting with anyone in that way, whether it’s a life or death situation or not,” Baker told the Southwest Times Record.

According to Baker, the department cannot investigate Reneau because she is no longer an employee. He said the department was instead reviewing policies, responses, the dispatch center, dispatcher training and swift-water rescue procedures.

5. The Fort Smith Police Department Has Received over 100 Death Threats

Fort Smith Police Department Spokesperson Aric Mitchell told News 5 the department has been getting death threats ever since the incident was made public. The Arkansas Democrat-Gazette reported the department had received more than 100 threats, including notes, calls and messages on social media.

While the threats are disturbing, Mitchell commented, “there isn’t anything that would rise to a threat level of concern, as most appear to be from out-of-state and include no specificity.”.

Portfolio copy reconstructed from the archived Heavy article. Social-share modules, navigation, embedded social-media posts, links, duplicate image captions, and unrelated page elements have been omitted for readability.