

NEWS

A year after drowning, community remembers Fitz Campbell-Thomas

BY NATHANIEL CLINE
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The life of Fitz Alexander Campbell-Thomas was celebrated by family members, friends and lawmakers over the weekend, a year after the Loudoun teen's drowning in the area of Confluence Park in the River Creek Community amid a delayed response by first responders.

The Riverside High School teenager, who was expected to graduate this year, was pronounced dead at a nearby hospital after numerous emergency communication breakdowns delayed local first responders' arrival, which came more than 30 minutes after the initial call for help.

But in the year since Campbell-Thomas' tragic death in a tributary to the Potomac River, changes in policy governing how public safety emergencies are handled, continue to have an effect not just in Loudoun, but also across the commonwealth.

"He would always say, 'Mommy you're winning and you're doing a great job,'" Michelle Thomas, Fitz's mother and president of the NAACP Loudoun Branch, said during Saturday's memorial walk.

"I plan to keep winning," she said. "I plan to win this fight, to continue to fight for justice for Fitz and public safety for all."

Thomas has received support from state legislators, which called on the governor's administration to investigate the teenager's June 4, 2020 death.

Eventually, the effort led to the creation of a working group to address the deficiencies with emergency 9-1-1 call routing in Virginia. In some cases, calls have been redirected to jurisdictions in



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Michelle Thomas, Fitz's mother and the NAACP Loudoun Branch president, at the foot of her late son Fitz Alexander Campbell-Thomas' gravestone on June 5.

bordering states instead of to emergency operations inside the commonwealth.

Last year, Dels. David Reid (D-32nd) and Roslyn Tyler (D-75th) introduced legislation that resulted in amended language in the state's recent budget directing the establishment of an E911 Border Response Workgroup.

"The things that we do today, and the things that we do tomorrow, and into the future will be in memory of Fitz and the goals and the aspirations that he had," Reid said at the memorial walk on Saturday afternoon.

Members of ADAMS Scout Troop 2019 led a few dozen supporters from Lansdowne Village Green to the African American Burial Ground for the Enslaved

at Belmont, where Fitz Campbell-Thomas is buried.

Loudoun County upgraded its 9-1-1 call system to the Emergency Services Internet Network that is connected to jurisdictions in the National Capital Region and commonwealth, and is shared on all public safety agencies.

Further, EMS officials said they have updated "commonplace names" — such as Confluence Park — for all area parks and waterways in the computer-aided dispatch and county mapping system, installed water safety and 9-1-1 awareness signage at popular recreational swimming areas, and created an online "River Atlas" that includes points of interest which was made available to all jurisdictions that are part of

mutual aid agreements for Potomac River response with Loudoun County.

EMS officials have updated training for dispatchers and call-takers, and are bolstering its emergency communications center staff with additional call-takers and a supervisor responsible for providing technical guidance and advice to ECC personnel, according to Rinehart.

As reported earlier, friends and volunteers pulled Campbell-Thomas from the water after he and other teenagers went swimming in the confluence of Goose Creek and the Potomac River on June 4.

Units from Loudoun County Combined Fire and Rescue System were dispatched to the area where they found Campbell-Thomas unresponsive, according to local emergency services. Campbell-Thomas was then transported to Inova Lansdowne Pediatric ER, where he was pronounced dead.

The family has gained support from the community, which has taken such acts as renaming Riverside High School's stadium after Campbell-Thomas and providing scholarships. 28 Loudoun County students have received scholarships totaling \$43,000 in honor of the late teenager.

Legacy Orthodontics, Campbell-Thomas' orthodontist office in Leesburg, named a scholarship in honor of the late teenager that is focused on helping youth in financial need and include comprehensive orthodontic treatment at no cost.

"The goal here is to give back to the community and allow Fitz's legacy to live on through others smiles," said Dr. Jeffrey Lombard, of Legacy Orthodontics.

Letter sent to County Attorney claims dispatchers were negligent in teen's 2020 drowning death

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The Office of the Loudoun County Attorney is expected to meet with the legal team representing the family of a Loudoun teen who drowned last year after receiving a letter detailing the family's charges that the county bears responsibility for the June death.

Loudoun County Attorney Leo Rogers said on Monday he has contacted the family's attorneys and told them he is available to meet to discuss the matter.

Fitz Alexander Campbell-Thomas drowned in the area of Confluence Park in the River Creek Community amid a delayed response by first responders and was pronounced dead at a nearby hospital.

In the letter, dated May 19 and addressed to the county attorney, attorneys Kenneth Bynum and Madison Gibbs said they had an opportunity to investigate the case and outline their view on the duty owed to the deceased teen and the liability of Loudoun County for his death.

After numerous emergency communi-

cation breakdowns, local first responders' arrival came more than 30 minutes after the initial call for help.

Campbell-Thomas was believed to have been in the water for approximately five minutes before friends noticed he was missing, according to a transcript of one of the multiple 9-1-1 calls documented in the Perdido Bay Terrace Significant Incident Review, issued several months after the tragedy.

Michelle Thomas, Fitz's mother and president of the NAACP Loudoun Branch, and her family argue that communication failures led to the teenager being denied the opportunity to receive emergency support in a timely manner.

The group argued in the letter that Campbell-Thomas was a person requiring attention from emergency services, certain procedures were not followed and that emergency services owed him a special duty.

"The afore-mentioned supports an establishment of private duty on behalf of the county to exercise reasonable care to immediately find Fitz and provide medi-

cal support, both of which they did not," the letter reads.

"We believe this negligence was a proximate cause of his death, and that liability lies squarely against Loudoun County."

As part of a statewide effort to address the deficiencies with emergency 9-1-1 call routing in Virginia, Thomas joined a working group called the E911 Border Response Workgroup.

Recently, the group provided recommendations to the governor, which include improving wireless 9-1-1 location accuracy and forming a Next Generation 9-1-1 Leadership Commission.

The workgroup also recommended the creation of a cross-border 9-1-1 call processing best-practices guide to support the implementation of new policies in the commonwealth, as well as address telecommunicator compensation, reclassification, recruitment, training, and retention.

In Loudoun County, EMS officials made a policy change directing 9-1-1 operators to dispatch Loudoun units to any incident on waterways adjoining neighboring jurisdictions, regardless of jurisdic-

tional responsibility.

Under the previous directive, Loudoun would redirect all calls for service for emergencies on the river made from the Virginia side to Montgomery since the Potomac River falls within their jurisdiction, according to Laura Rinehart, public information officer for Loudoun County Combined Fire and Rescue System.

The policy change has helped with a number of water rescues during heavy rainfalls, according to Laura Rinehart, public information officer for Loudoun County Combined Fire and Rescue System.

Thomas told the Times-Mirror earlier that the family has sent Montgomery County a settlement demand and notice of their intent to file a lawsuit, should the two parties not settle the matter.

As of Tuesday, Thomas said she has not received any response.

The office of the Montgomery County Attorney directed the Times-Mirror to the Public Information office, which did not respond to request for comment.