

Community mourns child lost to house fire

Church hosts memorial for the 8-year-old

Staff Reports

The children's minister at Marion Baptist Church may have said it best for all of Smyth County Friday: "Our hearts are broken."

Lisa Dockery shared that sentiment as she let the community know that the church would set up a memorial for Niko Crosby at its gazebo. It would offer a

place for people "to come and pray, bring flowers, stuffed animals, make a card.... All are welcome."

The 8-year-old Marion child's life was claimed by an early morning house fire on Friday.

According to a news release, the Smyth County Sheriff's Office got the call around 12:38 a.m. When deputies arrived at the Fortner Avenue home, it was

engulfed, the release said.

Aware a child was inside, crews from the Adwolfe, Marion, Chilhowie and Atkins fire departments worked to battle the flames, trying to gain entrance.

"We made every effort to get in there where he was, but the fire and smoke was so hot it pushed us out," said Adwolfe Fire Chief Steve Widener.

Once the fire was controlled enough to enter, crews found

the boy's body.

As people offered prayers Friday, they specified not only the family, most especially his parents, Alisa Haulsee Crosby and Hubert Crosby, but also the first-responders.

Widener acknowledged the trauma of the experience. He noted it was only the third fire fatality the department has experienced since it was started in the 1980s.

Crosby had attended Marion

Baptist. The youngster was a soccer player with plenty of energy.

The cause of the fire, which originated in an attached garage, has not yet been determined, but the sheriff's office says no foul play is suspected.

The Smyth County Sheriff's Office and Virginia State Police Bureau of Criminal Investigations is investigating.

Tree

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Through tears, she said, “I don’t have the words for how much generosity and love has been given us....”

From friends to coworkers to former customers,

Alisa said the community’s help and love has helped more than anyone can know. “I will never forget this town’s kindness,” she said.

God’s Support

Alisa also prays for the

community. “I hope God gives the best blessings to everyone in town. They deserve God’s best.”

Her faith and the support of the faith community have strengthened Alisa and her family too.

Despite the toll of the

tragedy, she said, “I feel somehow closer to God.”

She’s reassured by her Christian faith. “I know my son is in heaven and when it’s our time, I hope to be with him again.”

For now, Alisa said, “If God needed a soldier, he found one.”

With the community’s and God’s love, Alisa said, she and her husband are now back together and Elijah feels the support.

The mother is beyond grateful. If anyone needs help, Alisa hopes they come to her. She knows

the difference compassion and love make.

Alisa also hopes everyone knows the difference they can make in others’ lives. Of Niko, she reflected, “He was so little, but he did such big things.”

Community rallies to support family after loss of child, home

BY STEPHANIE PORTER-NICHOLS
Staff

Friday afternoon, a young father with tears threatening to spill over his eyelids walked up to the memorial for 8-year-old Niko Crosby. He looked at photos of the boy who died early that morning in a house fire. He examined the stuffed animals, toys, and flowers that were placed on benches, becoming part of the growing monument. He was searching for the words to tell his children about Niko.

Grandparents of one of Niko's fellow soccer players also visited the memorial at Marion Baptist Church, where the boy attended, and left a tribute.

Some of his soccer teammates

left tears and toys as did coaches, educators, friends, and parents, who were all trying to help their children while they hugged them more tightly as their grief and fears came close to overflowing.

Courtney Umbarger, a friend of Niko's mother, Alisa, understood.

Monday, she said, "As a mother, I felt compelled to do something. Her loss is unimaginable."

Umbarger started a campaign to help Alisa and her family meet their needs as her home was destroyed by the fire.

Blake Frazier, an owner of Fraziers' Seaver-Brown Funeral Service, also used "unimaginable" to describe the "tragedy this is for this young family and

community."

Frazier also responded as a father, saying, "I have two children, most all of the folks who work with us have children, and this is just the worst. It's unimaginable. We're never numb to the loss of someone's loved one. I think we constantly put ourselves in their place. I have more times than I can count with Niko. Personally going into the home that had been on fire just hours earlier to take his little body into our care was honestly one of the hardest things I have ever done. Talking to his parents may have been the second. He was not my child, but taking him out of that house, for a sec-

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ond, he sure could have been.”

Frazier turned his attention to the law enforcement and first-responders from multiple departments who fought the Fortner Avenue, Marion, house fire, tried to save the child, and first cared for his remains.

“....These people are walking, talking angels. The police along with the local fire departments and rescue personnel are a true gift to this community. We are so blessed to have them. I can't say enough to how hard they work to make such a difference. I also have to thank the folks at the dispatch office... they are so good to help.”

The community is rallying to help Alisa, Niko's father Hubert, and brother Elijah.

Two GoFundMe accounts have been established to support the family.

Tammy Murray, the owner of Sweet Bee Cupcakery in Marion, launched one, which has raised more than \$4,000. Samantha Hawk started another one that has collected more than \$700.

Frazier wanted the community to know that those donations will go to the family. “Our family, the funeral home and area churches have covered costs for the obituaries and items that are not owned by the funeral home. The family will not have a bill or amount owed. It's all covered.”

Umberger, an owner of Laurel Springs Farm Mercantile, with Brad's Tasty Dawgs & More, Blue Ridge Outfitters and Ds Street Grubb, all in Marion, are collecting monetary donations, gift cards and items to help the family. Everything in the home was a loss.

For Alisa, she wears women's clothing size 8/10 or small/medium, shoes size 9.

Elijah, who is 11, wears boys size 10/12 clothing and shoes size 2/3. He's said to love dirt bikes, Nerf guns, and Pokemon cards.

On Facebook, Umberger wrote, “Sweet girl, we are praying and will stand behind you as you grieve and rebuild. This is our job as a community. It's our turn to care.”

Oak Point Elementary School is also working to help the family and its community.

“I am saddened for the loss that the teachers, administrators and support staff at Oak Point have suffered the last couple of years, but their bond



LINDA BURCHETTE/SMYTH COUNTY NEWS & MESSENGER

A fire that began just after midnight Friday morning completely destroyed the Fortner Avenue home.

and love for each other is strong and a true testimony of the support from family and faculty. We are so blessed to live where we do,” Frazier reflected.

In late 2020, the Oak Point family was impacted by a murder-suicide that claimed the life of an OPES student and impacted two other children.

Yesterday evening, the school's staff planned a candlelight walk at OPES.

Dr. Dennis Carter, schools' superintendent, said Oak Point's principal notified families and staff of Niko's death Friday. Monday, plans were already in place to help students and staff who would be returning to the classroom Tuesday from Easter break.

Carter explained, “We have partnered with Mount Rogers [Community Services] to have counselors at the school, along with other Smyth County Schools counselors to help students and staff tomorrow [Tuesday] and as long as there is need.”

On behalf of the school system, Carter said, “Our hearts are broken.”

Monday evening, on Facebook, OPES Counseling wrote: “Whisper a prayer for everyone as we return to school tomorrow. Our hearts and prayers



are heavy with thoughts of family, the community, and OPES.”

Also Tuesday evening, Niko's Marion Rec League soccer team planned to hold a moment of silence for the young man who at age 8 was being described as a talented player.

Niko was active at Marion Baptist Church. He waved fronds in the Palm Sunday processional April 10 and that evening traveled to Kingsport with the church's youngsters to see an Easter play. A photo from after the play shows him sitting beside the actor portraying Jesus.

Some of Niko's passions will be remembered Wednesday evening during the visitation (5-8 p.m.) and his funeral service. Frazier noted that his “family is asking for his

friends to sign his dirt bike fenders and soccer balls.” Dr. Charles Stewart, MBC's pastor, will officiate the 8 p.m. service.

The community's love is encouraging the family. Frazier observed, “The family is just so appreciative of the community support. Both Hubert and Alisa are so thankful and overwhelmed at how good people are.”

The cause of the 12:38 a.m. fire, which originated in an attached garage, remains under investigation, but authorities don't suspect foul play.

Editor's note: In the interest of full disclosure, Stephanie Porter-Nichols serves as Marion Baptist Church's associate pastor.

Fire prompts serious look at hydrants, access

Supervisors consider dry wells, other tools for areas without water lines

BY STEPHANIE PORTER-NICHOLS
Staff

The April 15 house fire that claimed the life of an 8-year-old Marion boy weighed on the hearts and minds of the county's supervisors and launched a discussion at their meeting last week on fire suppression and bolstering firefighters' access to water.

The supervisors also focused on the limited access into the Hall Addition community, where the Fortner Avenue home

was destroyed.

The Adwolfe Fire Department served as the lead agency in battling the early morning blaze that also required the work and equipment of firefighters from the Marion, Chillhowie and Atkins fire departments.

Adwolfe Fire Chief Steve Widner described the fatal fire as "a tragic situation all the way around." However, in an interview, the 36-year firefighter cautioned against second-guessing the decisions and factors at play in this incident. Widener em-

phasized that with four tankers (two from Adwolfe and one each from Chillhowie and Atkins) at the scene, firefighters never ran out of water fighting the fire.

The home was fully engulfed when first-responders arrived on the scene. Widner remembered that he could see the blaze from a distance away and knew in advance what would be required.

The fire chief does acknowledge that access to water is a topic that deserves attention. Using tankers, he said, requires more personnel, which is another challenge for departments. "It's getting harder and harder to find young people"

to volunteer, Widner said, and most departments "don't have the numbers you need."

Some water systems, the chief said, aren't capable of supporting hydrants. The size of lines and pressure are factors that come into play. A fire department didn't exist in Adwolfe when that community's water system was put in, Widner observed.

County Administrator Shawn Utt reiterated that point during the supervisors' discussion, saying that water lines must be at least 6 inches to support fire hydrants. Many lines in residential areas are 2 and 4 inches.

Utt noted that the county's

GIS Department mapped all the hydrants and found more than officials expected.

Still, Utt said that a county-wide water study underway is looking at all the water systems, where hydrants are, and where lines exist that can support hydrants.

Supervisor Kris Ratcliff noted that hydrant density is harder to achieve in rural areas, but he encouraged his peers to adopt creative thinking and consider options like cost-sharing, which could allow a neighborhood to help pay to have a hydrant installed. Utt estimated that a

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single hydrant carries a cost of about \$4,000.

With nearby hydrants, Utt said that homeowners typically see insurance cost savings.

“Let’s think outside the box,” Ratliff urged, adding, “I’d hate to see a few dollars interfere” with a hydrant’s placement.

Board Chair Charlie Atkins also suggested that officials consider dry well or dry hydrants. He noted that in the eastern end of Atkins no water lines exist. Many rural communities have moved toward dry wells in those circumstances, he said.

Dry wells are typically a few feet deep and are designed to collect runoff and stormwater.

Supervisor Courtney Widener noted that tanks and wells with pumps can help in an emergency.

Supervisor Roscoe Call added that cisterns, which can store rainwater, might also prove useful.

Vice Chair Lori Deel urged her peers and county officials to look at a variety of options and to not cut costs by omitting hydrants from future water projects. If a fee was added to the water bill to help pay for hydrants, Deel said she would pay it.

Noting that county fire departments are even having to map pools as potential water sources, Deel said that to this point the county hasn’t taken safety and hydrants seriously enough.

Widner acknowledged that he has used swimming pools in the past for water.

Supervisor Widener urged the county to make fire suppression and options to enhance it a top priority.

Neighborhood access

Widener, who is a law enforcement officer, also asked officials to maintain a focus on access to the Hall Addition.

The Fortner Avenue fire, he said, magnified the problem. “Let’s make sure we keep pushing,” Widener said, explaining that one train coming through could delay any first responder.

Chief Widner, who also works for the sheriff’s office, said the limited access to the neighborhood affects fire, EMS, and law enforcement who may be needed quickly.

Access became a pressing issue in January 2014 when the Virginia Department of Transportation closed the McMullin Bridge, a primary path of access to the Hall Addition. VDOT inspectors found that the Rt. 660 bridge was fracture critical, meaning if one part of the bridge fractured, the structure would fail. VDOT inspectors determined that repairing the bridge wasn’t possible. It would have to be replaced.

The McMullin Bridge’s closure left the community feeling isolated and officials frustrated.

Motorists can detour around the closed bridge by using U.S. 11 and the east end of Rt. 660, a detour of approximately five miles. Hall Addition residents can also use Old Ebenezer Road, a two-lane country route.

Just two months after the closure, neighborhood residents expressed their what-if fears to the supervisors. They told supervisors that when police, fire and rescue are needed, seconds and minutes count.

That point was reiterated this week when Chief Widner said that the first 20 minutes of fighting a fire are the most critical as first-responders work to save property and lives.

In 2015, citizens met with the county’s then sheriff, emergency management coordinator and the district’s supervisor. They shared their fears about the potential for a hazardous chemical spill or other scenarios on the railroad, U.S. 11 or Interstate 81 that would block their primary path from the community.

VDOT and law enforcement worked to address scenarios in which Oak Point Elementary would need to be evacuated. At that time, VDOT added a gate to a limited-access fence that would allow buses and other vehicles from the school to directly enter I-81 with the Virginia State Police and Smyth County sheriff’s deputies creating a rolling roadblock to stop I-81 traffic so vehicles could safely pull onto the interstate.

Last summer, VDOT officials reported that current plans called for construction on McMullin Bridge’s replacement to begin in late 2025 or early 2026 with a projected price tag of \$14.6 million.

The proposal, according to a VDOT report, “would move the bridge to the south of the current location, down Brown’s Subdivision Road toward the school [Oak Point] and construct new approaches from both ends.”

VDOT has also undertaken other projects designed to improve traffic in the area.

Traffic turning from Railroad Drive has increased significantly since McMullin Bridge was closed. Work underway now would add a left and right turn lane onto Rt. 660 (Railroad Drive) from U.S. 11 in Marion.

VDOT is also developing plans to create a roundabout on either side of the bridge across I-81 at the intersections of U.S. 11 and Adwolfe Road and U.S. 11 and Browns Subdivision Road. The traffic circle would be designed to ease congestion.

At last week’s board meeting, Supervisor Widener urged his peers “to make sure we keep pushing.”

Fatal fire prompts 'Sound the Alarm' campaign

BY JASMINE FRANKS

Staff

Volunteers will go door-to-door in the Hall Addition this weekend to help install smoke detectors as part of the American Red Cross's "Sound the Alarm" campaign.

Each spring, Red Cross volunteers along with local firefighters and other volunteers visit one neighborhood to install the free smoke detectors and educate residents on fire safety.

The death of 8-year-old Niko Crosby, who was killed in a house fire in the Hall Addition in March, prompted the Red Cross to focus its efforts on that community. The request came from Chief Deputy State Fire Marshal Michael Yingling. Joining Red Cross volunteers and firefighters this year will be Niko's soccer teammates and friends from Marion Baptist Church, where he attended, as well as members of a local Boy Scout troop.

Sharon Dixon, disaster program manager for the Mountain Empire Chapter of the Red Cross, said the group will have more than 40 smoke detectors to install. On Thursday, they'll go out into the neighborhood knocking on doors to see which residents are interested in the free service. At homes where residents aren't there, they'll leave door hangers with information on how to sign up.

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Then on Saturday, while volunteers are installing the smoke detectors, they'll also use that time to talk to residents about fire safety.

"It helps prepare the family because when we go into the home to install the smoke alarms, we're also talking about fire drills," Dixon explained.

She said the volunteers will educate residents on common causes of fires, such as cooking, smoking, and using space heaters during the wintertime, and teach them how best to prevent such fires.

In addition, the group will also educate on safety preparedness, teach residents how to safely exit a home in the event of the fire, and encourage at-home fire drills.

Adwolfe Fire Chief Steve

Widner emphasized the importance of having a functional smoke detector in the home, pointing to Red Cross statistics that indicate that having a working smoke alarm cuts the risk of death by fire in half.

For those in the community who already have smoke alarms in place, Widner said, "We'll be more than happy to check them and make sure they're functional."

Smoke alarms typically have a lifespan of about 10 years, he said, and need battery changes around every six months. He also recommended every home have a fire extinguisher at the ready.

The chief also stressed the importance of making and practicing a fire drill plan.

"Create a plan—especially if you have kids—follow that plan and then practice that plan," he

said. "Don't just create one; practice it periodically."

The simple measure can go a long way, he said.

"It takes less than five minutes to say 'if something happens, this is our way out,' and have a designated area to meet, whether it be the driveway or a tree in the yard, so you can make sure that everybody is out and stays out."

Volunteers will be out in the Hall Addition neighborhood, visiting perspective homes late Thursday afternoon and will return for installations Saturday from 10 to noon.

For those who cannot participate in this weekend's program, the Red Cross has a sign up for virtual safety education on its website. More information on the "Sound the Alarm" campaign can be found at www.redcross.org.

Tree memorializes fire victim

Planting in Lynchburg honors 8-year-old who died in fire on April 15

BY STEPHANIE PORTER-NICHOLS
Staff

In Lynchburg, a young white oak tree is growing that Alisa Crosby hopes to see for at least a week each year. In 20 years, the mother imagines sitting under its shade with the adult versions of those who are now Marion Baptist Church's children and youth. They'll relax there together after working hard to help others, all the while serving God and celebrating the memory of Niko Crosby.

Eight-year-old Niko died in a house fire in the Hall Addition of Marion just after midnight on April 15.

These months later, his mom, Alisa, said she and Niko's family and friends continue to grieve and take life day to day.

While tears were shed last month at the annual statewide missions camp at Eagle Eyrie Baptist Conference Center, Alisa reflected, "Niko loved it there." The first year Niko went, she remembered that he was still a preschooler but especially connected with



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Alisa Crosby, Niko's mother, helped at the camp and said her heart was warmed by the love and support she felt as the tree was planted. Niko had attended the annual camp since he was a preschooler.

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packing meals for those in need in Haiti. "He felt like he was part of something bigger than himself," she said. "The value of giving – it really stuck with him."

This year, the MBC team, in conjunction with other youngsters from around Virginia helped package more than 14,200 packages each containing six to eight meals. Those packages are also headed to Haiti.

Niko, his mom recalled, "was not scared of a little hard work" and seemed to know its value. "He was beyond his years sometimes," Alisa said.

While Niko typically offered the world a mischievous smile, Alisa described him as "so caring, so determined, confident and very strong willed."

At one of his last soccer games, she encouraged Niko to take a break. He replied, "No, Mom. I'm pushing my body to the limit."

With Niko's determination in mind and his older brother Elijah ready to return to missions camp, Alisa kept up the family tradition and went too.

She was glad she did. "They teach such good lessons about helping the community... the world. It's a great experience for children."

At the week's end, under the direction of MBC's children's minister, Lisa Dockery, the children dedicated the white oak in Niko's memory. MBC's children and youth planted the tree.

The oak, Alisa said, is like Niko "small but it's got something big inside."

Seeing all the children and how much Niko meant to them and the Eagle Eyrie staff, "just warms my heart," Alisa reflected.

During the ceremony, Dockery read from Shel Silverstein's book *The Giv-*



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Andrew Owens, a MBC youth, hugged Alisa Crosby during the ceremony.

ing Tree. She noted some of Niko's traits: strong, helpful, generous, giving, kind, caring, and loving. The children received a hand-out with those characteristics on limbs extending from a tree trunk that featured a photo of Niko.

"I hope all the kids keep coming back and remembering the story of Niko... and want to be generous, hardworking, and kind," Alisa said.

She plans to keep coming back to help with the camp.

"I'm excited to grow old and go back and see the tree grow," she said.

The tree is growing near the children's building and playground, which includes swings and monkey bars – Niko's favorites.

Community Support

This school year, Alisa noted, that Oak Point Elementary, where Niko attended, plans to create a similar memorial.

The community's support throughout this tragedy continues to bolster Alisa, her husband, and Elijah.