

Bus mishap claims student

12-year-old girl dies from injuries suffered in freak accident

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Frazzled, friends and school officials waited, worried and wept late Wednesday night as a 12-year-old Stratton Junior High School student died hours after a school bus crushed her in a freak accident.

Carey Chipps had just stepped off Raleigh County school bus 191 on Timber Ridge Drive in Beckley's Woodcrest section when the doors

closed, snaring the string of the blue-and-white jacket the girl was carrying, Beckley City Police Officer Randy Kountz said.

The brown-haired girl became tangled in the jacket and fell under the massive rear bus tires, Kountz said.

As surgeons at Raleigh General Hospital worked for five hours to save her, about 50 of her classmates, relatives and a cross-section of the community gathered in the lobby to offer support to her

parents and 14-year-old brother, Jason.

When doctors announced they were nearing the end of what they thought was a successful operation, Carey's parents were taken to the fourth floor's Surgical Intensive Care Unit to wait for her.

Shortly after 10 p.m., parents Jane and Tom Chipps returned to the lobby with the news those who were waiting had dreaded all evening.

Carey Chipps died at 9:41 p.m. "Carey was a very special girl,

and we don't want to lose her," Tom Chipps said as he spoke of his daughter's death to those gathered around him and his wife.

"We don't have the answers. She's looking after herself now. Let's hope she has the answers."

An older man led those gathered in the Lord's Prayer and offered words of comfort for Carey's family.

Those who had waited in the lobby and pulled for Carey during her hours in the operating room burst into tears. Raleigh County

Schools Superintendent Dwight Dials, who was at the hospital through most of the evening, hung his head and wept.

Earlier, Jane Chipps had described how Carey, whose twin sister died at birth, had always been a fighter. "I've always said that she was like two little girls rolled up into one."

Tom Chipps had told of riding in the ambulance to the hospital with

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his daughter, who was conscious after the accident.

"I told her I love her, and she told me she loves me," he said.

During the evening, the mood in the lobby often was optimistic, with Tom Chipps consoling those who came to console him. The father frequently walked from group to group, flashing the thumbs-up sign.

"If God wasn't with her, she would never have made it off that street. That's the truth, so I've claimed a victory," Tom Chipps said at one point.

Only once was the optimistic mood jolted, by an urgent, repeated announcement summoning medical personnel to an operating room for a code six. All conversation in the lobby ceased and apprehensive eyes darted toward the elevator.

In many hospitals, a code six signals cardiac arrest.

Police said the accident occurred when bus driver Carlos Garten, who was unaware that Carey Chipps had fallen, pulled forward. The 5-foot, 4-inch, 85-pound girl was dragged 40 feet before being pulled under the rear wheels of the 12-ton bus, police said.

About 27 other students were still on the bus at the time of the accident, Kountz said. Afterward, another driver took over Garten's run, finishing it with the same bus, Raleigh County Transportation Director Richard Mann said.

Using his bus' citizen band radio, Garten called school officials, who in turn quickly summoned an ambulance, Kountz continued.

The ambulance arrived at about 4:24 p.m. on Timber Ridge, just two streets away from the Chipps' home on Chickadee Way. Ambulance officials in turn called the police, who went to the hospital rather than to the accident scene, Kountz said.

The eight to 10 people who worked to save Carey Chipps at the hospital found that she had broken ribs, a collapsed lung, a torn diaphragm and internal organ injuries. Kountz said her spring-weight jacket appeared to have tread marks on it.

Doctors operated for at least five

hours on her upper-body injury before concentrating on pelvic and leg fractures.

Co-workers and school officials said 56-year-old Garten, who has been with the school system seven years, is a careful, conscientious driver.

"This is what you call an accident," Dials said at the hospital Wednesday night. "It's so sad don't think anyone was being careless."

Dials said Garten was devoted to his students. The bus driver often took his young charges to end-of-the-year pool and pizza parties and frequently attended their graduation celebrations, he added.

Assistant Superintendent Russ Rappold said Wednesday's tragedy is unparalleled in his experience with the school system.

"I've been with the system for 15 years, and I know of no other accident of this type, this serious," Rappold said.

Ruth Hurt, president of the Raleigh County School Service Personnel Association, described Garten as a "lovely person."

"He's worked with children these years," Hurt said. "I got to know him years ago ... at the Little League park where he worked with my son."

Garten is a noted amateur softball umpire and public address announcer for high school basketball games at the Raleigh County Armory.

Raleigh County Pupil Services Director Larry Hatfield said he had spoken with an extremely upset Garten after the accident. Hatfield said he also plans to go to Stratton today to help the girl's classmates through the trauma.

"With kids, it's a shock," Hatfield said. "They can't believe it."

State Education Department Transportation Director Mike Roscoe said the last student death similar to Carey Chipps' was seven or eight years ago in Marshall County.

In each of the past two years, students have been killed on their way to catch school buses, but neither of those deaths involved the school bus itself, Roscoe added.