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Weather blamed in Orion Twp. crash that killed 3 teens

Driver, who is mom of one victim, hospitalized

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The Detroit News

Orion Township -- When three teen girls were riding home last week, they were as jubilant as usual.

Ashley Felder and twins Sy'mone Analyse Nicole Johnson and Brianna Marie Latreese Johnson, all 14, were returning from Oxford High School, where two of the girls were on a cheerleading squad.

In the car, "they were laughing and joking, having fun," said Robert Elam, the boyfriend of the twins' mother, who drove them home. "They were outgoing girls ... liked to have a good time."

That would change days later.

All three girls died early Monday after piling into a 2005 Toyota for a ride to a school in blowing snow.

As Felder's mother, Barbara, 39, headed north on Joslyn near Lake Sixteen about 7 a.m., she apparently lost control of the vehicle and slid into the southbound lanes and into the path of a 2002 GMC Sierra pickup. The crash killed all three girls. "The snow was blowing almost to a whiteout for a period this morning," said Oakland County Undersheriff Michael McCabe, who was in the area around the time of the crash.

"There's no question this was weather-related."

Ashley Felder was sitting in the passenger seat of the Toyota and was pronounced dead at the scene. The twins, both in the rear seat, were pronounced dead at Pontiac Osteopathic Hospital.

Barbara Felder was hospitalized in stable condition Monday night with unspecified injuries.

The pickup's driver, a 40-year-old Lake Orion man, wasn't hurt in the crash. The Felders were wearing seat belts; the Johnson girls were not, according to investigators.

Oxford High Principal Mike Schweig said grief counselors were being made available to the school's 1,380 students -- 340 of them freshmen, like the victims.

"We've never had anything like this before, not of this magnitude," said Schweig. "It is horrible."

"The students have only been here since September, and I don't know that they've been in a lot of activities, but there has been a great outpouring of students we've helped through the grieving process," he said.

"For the limited time they were here, they got to know a lot of kids. It's not the way you want to find out about how much kids care about you, but it was nice to see."

William Skilling, superintendent of Oxford Community Schools, said: "We're very saddened, and our thoughts and prayers go out to the families." The district canceled all school events, practices and the school board meeting Monday evening, he said.

Relatives and friends of the victims gathered to comfort each other in an emergency room at Pontiac Osteopathic Hospital on Monday.

"It's a tragedy," said emergency room physician Michael Doyle. "We began getting patients around 8 a.m., and people have been here all day."

In November, the Road Commission for Oakland County cautioned motorists that budget cuts had forced them to lay off 21 percent of their drivers, resulting in less salting of roads.

But Oakland County Sheriff Michael Bouchard said fewer salt trucks likely didn't play a part in Monday's deaths.

"At this point I can't say there's any connection to (the reduction in staff)," Bouchard said. "There was a lot of snow still coming down (at the time of the accident), so even if someone had made a pass with a plow just a few minutes earlier and salted, the streets still would have been slick, since the snow was coming down so heavily."

Two people who talked with Barbara Felder at her hospital bedside said she seemed alert and grief-stricken by the accident.

Felder is a secretary at Oakland Circuit Court. Kevin Oeffner, head court administrator who has worked with Felder for seven years, said workers were stunned by the news. Oeffner said he learned of the crash from deputies and went to the hospital on his lunch hour to see her.

"She is a terrific employee, and our hearts go out to her and her family and the family of the other girls," said Oeffner.

"She would usually beat us all into work and be here before 8:30 a.m. This must have been her day to drive."

Bishop William Murphy Jr., pastor of New Mount Moriah International Church in Pontiac, said the Felders are well-respected and loved members of the community. Felder is one of the church's elders, Murphy said.

"Both she and her daughter have been very active in our church," he said. "There is nothing she wouldn't do for you."

"Ashley is a nice girl and very talented and motivated," he said. "And those other girls, too. It's very sad."

The twins, who turned 14 in September, met Felder at school and quickly clicked, Elam said.

Both girls often attended Christ Temple Apostolic Church in Pontiac with their mother, Latoya Mojet, who is expecting a son next month.

"They were good girls ... they went to church and school, did their homework," Elam said. "They just wanted to go to college."

James Keys, a local pastor and longtime family friend, said the twins were "very well-disciplined, very active, very friendly, very respectful. ... I don't think you could've asked for any more. They were the kind of girls that could set a good example."

Staff Writers Shawn D. Lewis and George Hunter contributed.

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Additional Facts

How to help

Funeral arrangements were incomplete Monday night. Oxford High School officials have established a fund to help the families defray funeral expenses. Donations can be made to The Ashley, Brianna and Sy'mone Fund, c/o Oxford High School, 745 N. Oxford Road, Oxford, MI 48371

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