Authorities confirm 2 storm-related deaths: motorcyclist from Blacksburg, firefighter in Franklin County

By Neil Harvey and Duncan Adams
The Roanoke Times

Bedford County couple killed in house fire identified

Updated 4:50 p.m.

The Bedford County Sheriff’s Office confirmed this afternoon the names of the elderly Bedford County couple killed by a house fire that might have been started by Friday’s storm.

Killed by the fire at their home on Edmunds Court in Big Island were William M. “Bill” Benton, 96, and Edith “Edie” Benton, 97.

Big Island Volunteer Fire Company Chief Brandon Cocke said crews responded to the 1000 block of Edmunds Court in Big Island about 3:40 a.m. Saturday. He said it was an older, two-story brick country home.

“When we got there, there were power lines down behind the house as well as a very large tree down,” Cocke said. “We assume that played a role, but it’s still being investigated.

“The fire definitely happened at the back side of the house.”

It took about an hour to get the fire under control, said Cocke. The house was destroyed. A damage estimate was not available.

Crews from five different stations turned out to fight the fire, including Bedford County, Boonsboro, Forest and Glasgow.

No one else was in the house at the time, and no crew members injured. Cocke said he’d been told the couple had a pet dog, but it was not accounted for Monday.

Cocke said the response marked a stark change from the norm for his small volunteer fire company.

“We ran 11 calls that day — that’s a lot for Big Island. In February, we ran 8. We have about 150 to 200 a year. Eleven in one day is unheard of,” he said, adding that he believed the storm was the cause of the spike.
Blacksburg motorcyclist killed Friday night in Pilot
Updated 11:20 a.m.

Excessive speed and a tree downed by wind led to the death of a motorcyclist Friday night in Montgomery County.

Daniel Gibson, 53, of Blacksburg was killed about 10:20 p.m. in the 2700 block of Huffville Road in Pilot after his motorcycle partially struck a pickup truck, according to Montgomery County Sheriff’s Capt. Brian Wright.

The truck, a 2003 Dodge, had stopped because of a fallen tree, and Gibson passed it on the shoulder at what witnesses said was a high rate of speed. Gibson clipped the truck’s side-view mirror and lost control.

Wright said Gibson, who was wearing a helmet, was pronounced dead at the scene.

Franklin County firefighter dies of injuries sustained during Friday windstorm
Updated 10:42 a.m.

Franklin County officials have announced that a firefighter critically injured during Friday night’s brutal windstorm has died.

Firefighter and EMT John Echternach Jr., 54, died today, according to a release issued by the Franklin County Sheriff’s Office.

Echternach was injured when a tree fell on him as he helped a motorist Friday.

The sheriff’s office said he was a member of the Boones Mill Fire-EMS Department and the Franklin County Department of Public Safety since June 2003.

Echternach was also an academic coordinator of clinical education at Jefferson College of Health Sciences and an assistant professor in the physical therapist assistant department.

He joined the faculty in January but officials said his family had a long history with the school.

“His father is part of the advisory board for the physical therapy program,” said college spokesman Mark Lambert. “His wife taught with the program in different capacities for almost 20 years. They’ve been very involved with the college for quite a while.”

Funeral arrangements will be announced later this week.