

Survivor of Jennings Crash Details Accident



T.R. Wilson

large tree looking down at me." Wilson and Jennings were traveling south on Winston Lake Road in their patrol car around 6:30 p.m.

on Jan. 29 when Jennings lost control of the vehicle at the crest of a hill where the road curves. Tread marks on the road — a sign of brakes being applied — indicated that Jennings lost control of the car about 82 feet before the car hit a tree on the east side of the road.

Jennings, 30, died; Wilson, 28, was seriously injured. Wilson, a five-year veteran who returned to work after four months of rehabilitation, currently works behind a desk in the warrant office.

When the accident occurred, the officers were on their way to Forest Ridge Apartments (formerly Goler Apartments) for foot-patrol duty. Wilson said Jennings was slightly speeding.

The impact demolished the pas-

senger side of the car, and moments after the collision the 1992 Ford Taurus burst into flames. Wilson barely escaped before the car's full tank exploded.

Wilson said that he tried to move, but there was something wrong with the lower part of his body. Later, he realized that his pelvis had been broken by the pistol strapped to the right side of his hip. The weapon had received the brunt of the impact from the car door, which caved in because of the tree. The car was not equipped with an air bag, but Wilson said he was wearing his seat belt.

He said he tried to call for help, but the impact had apparently damaged the radio attached to his holster belt. He said that he looked over at

Jennings and saw that he was unconscious and thought that he too would regain his senses. By that time, he looked over his shoulder and saw smoke and flames shooting up from the trunk area.

He shook Jennings, but he did not respond, Wilson said. He then tried to get out through the passenger-side window but the impact had knocked out the power needed to lower the window. The window on Jennings' side, however, was working.

He climbed over his partner's body.

Once outside he tried to stand, but his injured pelvis wouldn't allow that. The injury also prevented him, he said, from saving his friend.

"As much as I wanted to, I

couldn't get to Mike," Wilson said. He started crawling toward the road and was only a few feet away from the car, when it erupted into flames fueled by a full tank of gas, Wilson said.

Robert Bethea, a golfer who was leaving the Winston Lake Golf course at the time of the accident, told the *Chronicle* in February that he discovered Wilson on his hands and knees hollering for help. He said the car was burning pretty well by the time he reached it, and he tried several times to get close to it, but bullets started going off.

Besides the broken pelvis, Wilson said he suffered internal bleeding, a ruptured bladder and lacerations on his forehead.

He said he heard about Jen-

nings' reputation before he joined the department and knew that "Mike was the kind of person you could get along with." They had only been partners for about month.

Wilson was hospitalized for more than a week. He said there was a lot of pain and a lot of lying around, but what got him through those days was prayer, his wife, Lisa, and the concern expressed from people he didn't know.

"That helped heal me more than anything," he said of the well-wishers. One get-well card he received stands out more than the others because of the person it came from — a man Wilson arrested on drug charges while he was on foot patrol.

Police Chief Finally Talks to the *Chronicle*

the city — black and white communities combined — has got to be based on communication," he said. "The police department is here to ensure for every citizen that they can walk the streets safely — that they don't have to worry about the drug dealers or the rapists and robbers, and that they can let their children go out and play without a sense of fear of what might happen to them."

One of Sweat's most "frustrating" concerns, he said, is a revolving door in the penal system.

"The criminal is beating the system — the system being the courts and the department of corrections," he said. "We are catching the bad guys. We are the one unit of that system — the police — that is doing its job. We catch them, we take them to court and we get them convicted. And then they're turned right back into the streets, with no rehabilitation being conclusively proven. Punishment is not really there."

Sweat noted that one of the suspects in the Talonda Lanier incident, wherein a 6-year-old girl was shot while sleeping in her mother's car, served just over three months in prison following a conviction of two 10-year sentences.

Sweat, a native of Winston-Salem and a 1966 graduate of

Reynolds High School, joined the city's police department after earning a degree in business administration from East Carolina University in 1970. He said he never seriously considered being an officer until he participated in the police department's ride-along program while he was still at ECU. He worked his way through the ranks and became chief in 1987.

And as for the headaches of being chief of police:

"At times we mess up, and when we do it's difficult to deal with those incidents both internally and externally and also from a family standpoint. A lot of people fail to realize that police officers are human beings.

"I think the pressure they feel from the press ..." he said. "And I understand the press' job of looking for those kind of stories ... They

sometimes forget that the individual's got a family, got kids in the school system here."

Sweat said he believes that a large portion of the African-American community supports the police. But the portion that is against the police, he said, is often more vocal.

He said that poverty breeds crime, and things won't change until the "bigger institutions of the community" get involved by offering more opportunities. One example he cited of the department doing its part is the 920 Club, a police-sponsored program for youths in Cleveland Avenue Homes.

On perhaps one of the hottest issues facing the police this summer, Sweat said he has no intention of re-examining the use of pepper spray.

"Since we've instituted it, it has probably prevented more serious injuries," he said. "What else have

we got to resort to? Nobody wins in a fist fight. Nobody wins if you got to pull out a baton and start hitting. Using o.c. (oleoresin capsicum) is much better and less dangerous than any of the other options you have."

Sweat said that what needs to be stressed is that when an officer says a suspect is under arrest, go with that officer.

"Don't fight me. Your day will come in court. When you attack a police officer, you're going to get sprayed," he said.

Sweat also said he was concerned about the low number of minority officers on the force. Of the nearly 450 sworn police officers, only about 80 are African American.

"For whatever reason, we simply don't get enough (minority applicants). We're putting forth efforts everywhere we can to recruit minorities."

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Third Black Killed

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Americans. Harvey was the third young black man in two weeks to be shot to death in the city's streets. No arrests have been made in Harvey's killing.

Barrage of Bullets

A barrage of buckshot and bullets was fired at approximately 3:30 a.m. shortly after a car pulled up next to Harvey, neighbors said.

"All I heard was bang, bang, bang," said Thomas England, who saw the fatally wounded man lying on the sidewalk across the street from his home.

"We heard the shooting — there were about six shots," said one woman who did not want to be identified. "He was yelling 'I don't know you.' I heard him groaning. I said to my husband when he stopped groaning that he was dead."

She said that she knew Harvey as a young child when she was working at a community center.

The woman's grandson, Hank Perry, also heard the shots.

"I heard a semiautomatic weapon fire two, three times and then a shotgun," he said.

Neighbors said this was the first killing they had witnessed in the usually peaceful community of mostly elderly residents.

Said Nannie Stewart, Harvey's 75-year-old grandmother: "He was a loving grandson. He would hug me around the neck."

"I lost my best friend," said Sandra Harvey, the man's mother.

She and her son lived together on Fondly Avenue. That Wednesday morning she spotted him a little more than a hour before his death, as she was returning home from her job at Baptist Hospital. She offered him a ride home, but she said he preferred to walk. It was the last time she saw him alive. She said her son had a habit of walking by himself at night.

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