

Sneezing Itchy, runny nose
Congestion Red, itchy, watery eyes

Double tragedy in Caroline

Deputy kills himself after going to scene of girlfriend's death

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BOWLING GREEN Sheriff's deputy Leonard W. Reel had been trying to reach his girlfriend, to find out why she was late for lunch, when he was diverted to the scene of a nearby wreck.

He was directing traffic around the crash scene Monday afternoon when a supervisor walked over and told Reel that his girlfriend, Elizabeth C. Ryan, had been killed in the nearby wreckage.

Less than 48 hours later, Reel too was dead, after the distraught officer shot himself with his service pistol.

Yesterday, the Caroline County Sheriff's Office was still coping with the three-day chain of events. Black ribbons hung outside the 90-member department's headquarters in the small town of Bowling Green.

"It's been a whirlwind," Maj. Mike Hall said as he helped arrange tonight's joint memorial service for Reel and Ryan. Both were 23. The service will be held at 7 p.m. at Bowling Green United Methodist Church.

State police say Ryan was driving south in a 2001 Chevrolet Monte Carlo when the vehicle ran off the right side of the road, then overcorrected to the left and ran off the other side. The vehicle struck the guardrail and bridge, then overturned down an embankment.

Ryan, who police say was not wearing a seat belt, died at the scene of the 4:40 p.m. wreck. Her 3-year-old daughter, Ciarra, was flown by helicopter to VCU Medical Center in Richmond, where she was treated and released. She is now staying with relatives. The girl was properly restrained in a child-safety seat.

Hall said Reel, a two-year sheriff's office veteran, insisted on seeing the wreckage and his girlfriend.

"He saw it all," Hall said, adding that the couple had been dating for nearly a year. Reel also wanted to be the one to tell Ryan's mother, Hall said. The young couple were engaged and planned to buy a home.

An officer was assigned to Reel and accompanied him first to Mary Washington Hospital in Fredericksburg to meet with Ryan's mother. Then, the officer took Reel to Richmond to check on the little girl. Reel then arranged to stay for a while with his older sister.

Caroline Sheriff Anthony A. Lippa Jr. said Reel declined an offer for counseling and told other colleagues he was OK.

"He convinced me," Lippa said yesterday.

On Wednesday morning, Reel attended the funeral-home viewing for his girlfriend.

"He told his sister he'd gotten a handle on everything," Hall said.

Afterward, Reel told his sister he planned to go home and take a shower. A short time later, she tried to get in touch with him by phone.

"He texted back and said he couldn't live without his girlfriend," Hall said.

Worried, the sister drove to the house, where she found Reel had shot himself. Lippa said the sister was still cradling her brother when officers arrived.

Reel, who graduated from Caroline High School in 2003, joined the department in July 2005, after having worked in construction and at a local Food Lion grocery store.

"Leonard was a great kid. I call him a kid because he was a kid," Hall said, adding he believes the trauma of his girlfriend's death and Reel's relatively young age were factors in his suicide.

Some of the highest suicide rates in the nation are for law-enforcement officers between the ages of 21 and 35, said John Violanti, a former police officer and now research professor at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

"The old guys are less likely to commit suicide than the guy fresh out of the academy," he said.

Hall said it's not uncommon for police and rescuers to respond to scenes only to find that they know, or are related to, the victims. He said it has happened to him. Last fall, a Caroline sheriff's investigator found out upon arriving at a shooting scene that the mortally wounded victim was his cousin.

Nancy Davis, formerly a chief of counseling services for the FBI and now in private practice in Fairfax, said officers often shun help.

"They get good at hiding how they're doing. They hide it because they think it's not macho to need help," she said.

Davis also said the ready availability of a service weapon means a distraught officer can act immediately on a suicidal impulse.

"It just takes a second," she said.

Lippa said he would not guess what might or might not have happened if the department had taken away Reel's semiautomatic pistol.

"You don't think he could have found another gun? You could do it different ways," Lippa said.

Authorities say Reel left a note apologizing for his actions and asking to be buried beside Ryan. The families are working together to honor the deputy's last request.

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