

## **Local EMS rescuer dies**

Joe Snow tried to save teens from drowning in Ringgold creek

By MELISSA TYNDALL  
The Leaf-Chronicle

The flag at Emergency Medical Service Station 20 flew at half-staff Sunday as the EMS workers inside laughed, cried and remembered their best moments with Joe Snow.

Snow, who was critically injured during a water rescue operation at Ringgold Creek on May 26, died at about 4:02 a.m. at Vanderbilt Hospital Sunday morning. Snow had been in critical condition since Thursday.

“He was a seasoned paramedic. He fought a long, hard battle and our prayers are with this family in this time of grief. It’s a time to honor him, his family and all public safety officers,” Emergency Medical Service Capt. Gary Perry said. “A lot of us are still in a grieving state. It’s hard when you lose a comrade in the line of duty.”

Terri Hightower, one of Snow’s colleagues, described him as “squirrely” because of his eager, gung-ho attitude in the workplace from day one.

“We take a lot of comfort in knowing he passed doing what he loved to do,” she said, smiling at the thought of him. “It was his passion. He was a really good guy. Now’s the time to celebrate his life.”

To add to Sunday’s heightened emotions, Hightower also grieved on behalf of her son, Chris Skull, who was Snow’s current partner at the EMS station. Hightower and Skull, however, are just two of the large crew who felt a void Sunday, alternating between laughing and crying as they told stories about Snow. The station even had a photograph of Snow — focused on the job at hand — on their dry-erase board with the words, “He loved his job” inked in green beneath it.

“He was a down-to-earth, simple, god-fearing, family-loving man,” said Hightower. “His memory will never be gone — he’s left that much of a mark etched in everyone.”

In light of recent events, many might call Joe Snow a hero, but those who knew him best said he was too humble to let anyone describe him that way.

“He was a very, very nice person — very soft-spoken, meaningful. He was dedicated, not only as a paramedic, but as a rescuer,” Wes Kline, director of the Montgomery County

Emergency Medical Services, said. “Knowing him personally, he would not want to be called a hero. He would be a man that would do anything for anyone. He had high regard for what he did, and he wouldn’t want to be called that. People might perceive it as much, but he felt he went to do job like he would do any other job. He would always give it his best.”

Snow, who worked for EMS, also was trained in swift-water rescue. Klein said it was obvious, based on Thursday night’s events, that Snow was on a driven mission to help the families of Philipp Seifert and Vincent Kruk despite the risks.

“The risks are always there in any type of rescue work you do —whether water or transport. These are calculated risks that are always going to be there — that’s why personnel train and do that type rescue work. He was very safety-oriented,” said Klein. “But, he loved every minute of it. He was a very dedicated employee, especially to his profession. He trained all the time, so he could provide better care and rescue techniques to help people.”

Seifert and Kruk, both 15, were killed after a jump into Ringgold Creek Thursday evening. The creek’s swift undertow — quickened due to rainfall — swept the boys down the stream and over a 10-foot dam.

“I just want the community to keep the family and Joe in their prayers. That’s all we can ask for right now. It’s a sad day for EMS and public safety in general,” said Perry.

Snow, who had been with the EMS about eight years, left behind two sons — Michael, 7, and Matthew, 5.

“It’s been tough. It’s tough when you lose some that’s not just an employee, but a friend. He was a friend to many over there — all of our staff,” said Klein. “All the EMS will deeply miss him. We were certainly praying for a full recovery, but it didn’t happen. But we have to pick up and continue on with our thoughts and prayers. Certainly our prayers are with his family and the ones who lost their children. That’s what we’re all about.”

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## **JOE SNOW DIED MAY 28 A COMMUNITY HERO**

He saved numerous lives before sacrificing his own trying to rescue drowning teens. Even in death, his watch hasn't ended.

'Medic 249' gave his life while watching over ours

Friends say paramedic died doing what he loved

By MELISSA TYNDALL  
The Leaf-Chronicle

More than 150 people stood in the Dickson County Memorial Gardens Thursday as an emergency dispatcher called out to Joe Snow for the last time.

It was not until the dispatcher paged "Medic 249," and for Snow by name, that some of his colleagues and loved ones finally broke down. People suddenly began sobbing or wiping sweat and tears from their faces, for they knew Snow would never again answer a call to duty.

A short time before the heart-wrenching call, dozens of emergency vehicles with lights blazing formed a funeral procession that passed under a huge American flag hung over state Highway 70 in Dickson County.

"He was the person that would be there any time you needed him," Jess Gibbs, a local EMS worker, said after the funeral. "He worked a lot of bad calls and did a lot of good things. He saved a lot of lives."

Snow's death was a result of critical injuries he suffered in attempts to rescue Philipp Seifert and Vince "Pooh Bear" Kruk — 15 year-old boys killed after a jump into rain-swollen Ringgold Creek May 25. The creek's swift undertow swept the boys downstream and over a 10-foot dam. Snow died Sunday after being removed from life support.

Eerily, only one photograph taken by EMS personnel at the May 25 scene was usable — it was of Snow in his water rescue gear.

The last photo taken of Snow hung in the Emergency Operations Complex Thursday evening, a physical testament to what slews of deputies, police officers, EMS workers and firefighters like Ricky Woodruff said about Snow.

"He was outgoing — bubbly," said Woodruff, who worked with Snow for 10 years at the Cunningham Volunteer Fire Department. "He died doing what he loved to do."

Both Woodruff and Jess Gibbs said Snow constantly spoke of his children. The eight-year veteran paramedic, who was a member of EMS's swift water rescue team, leaves behind two sons — Michael, 7, and Matthew, 5 — who clutched folded American flags at the service.

“He was a great father,” said Gibbs. “Anytime he wasn’t at work, he was with them. He put them first. He always talked about them and was definitely a proud dad.”

Other survivors also include mother of his children, Lori Snow; his father and stepmother, Hank and Jeannie Snow; his brother, Justin Snow; his sister, Jennifer Snow; his grandparents, Bill and Marie Melson; and fiance, Dana Newsom.

Adding to the tragedy, Snow had not proposed to Newsom until the morning of May 25 — merely hours before the rescue attempt that resulted in his untimely death.

While many are left behind to grieve, it will not keep people like Snow’s partner, Chris Scull, from honoring and remembering him as a colleague, a hero and a friend.

“He had this thing about driving — he had to drive to every call. And his smile —he’s got this grin,” said Scull, recalling some of his favorite memories of Snow.

“You could never make him mad. No matter what you did, you could never make him mad. If you didn’t know something, he would teach you. He taught me things I’ll never forget — not just in EMS, but life itself. He was an awesome guy. He’ll always be there to watch over us.”

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## **Medical costs come crashing in on family**

Family of boy with rare bone illness caught in health care nightmare

"I don't understand how the system works. So many people are getting help that aren't in the situation we're in, and we can't get any help".

### **ELVIRA ORTIZ**

the mother of a local family that has fallen through the cracks of an evolving state healthcare system

### **By MELISSA TYNDALL**

The Leaf-Chronicle

On a weeknight at the Ortiz home, children's shoes are piled by the front door, Tim McGraw songs drift from the radio and the family plays a card game.

Inocerio Ortiz and his sons sit around the dining room table teasing each other about who will win the next round of Phase 10. When someone finally wins, they gloat playfully, showing the tight-knit bond within the Hispanic family as laughter fills the upper floor of their house.

Their attitudes do not reflect the dire situation they're in.

This family is one of many across the state that has fallen between the cracks of the state's evolving health care system.

"I don't understand how the system works," Elvira Ortiz said. "So many people are getting help that aren't in the situation we're in, and we can't get any help."

The father, Inocerio, was diagnosed with diabetes shortly after he retired from the Army. Elvira, the mother of six sons, is legally blind from cataracts — something that leaves her unable to work or drive a vehicle.

Three of the Ortiz boys — a 21-year-old Marine, twin 19-year-olds, a 15-year-old, an 8-year-old and a 5-year-old — suffer from cataracts as well.

The worst case, however, is the 5-year-old, Migdiel, whom the family mostly refers to as "the baby."

Migdiel, a spunky child with an infectious laugh who adores his older brothers, suffers from a rare disease called McCune-Albright syndrome. It debilitates the kindergartner and destroys his bones — forcing him into frequent visits at Vanderbilt Children’s Hospital.

These ailments have combined to stack the Ortiz’s medical bills higher — too high for their good spirits to laugh away.

## **The Catch-22**

Inocerio Ortiz qualified for Tricare after his 20-year stint in the Army, but Tricare is simply not enough to cover all of the family’s needs.

Even the wheelchair Migdiel needs for kindergarten this year is not fully covered, and the Ortiz family cannot afford their half of a chair priced at over \$3,500.

But Tricare is just part of the problem. Elvira said her husband’s diabetes diagnosis cost him a civilian job after he retired from the military. She said the company no longer wanted to send him to Iraq because they feared his condition would keep him out of work.

The family had to file for Chapter 13 bankruptcy, locking up all of Inocerio’s paycheck from moving military equipment at Fort Campbell’s Stanley and Associates. The family now lives solely off of his Army retirement.

Between the meager retirement checks and the locked-in paychecks from Stanley, the Ortiz family is making too much money to qualify for TennCare or Medicaid, but not enough to pay their medical bills.

After being married to her high school sweetheart for years, and being unable to work herself, it is easy to see why Elvira becomes upset thinking about her husband’s guilt and frustration over their finances.

“He’s regretting staying in the military so long,” she said. “They appreciate what he’s done, but it seems like they’re saying, ‘Thanks for what you did, but you’re done, so were done with you.’ It’s not that my husband wanted this to happen, but he feels like it’s his fault,” she said, wiping tears from her face.

## **How services work**

Marilyn Wilson, director of communications for TennCare, said the state uses federal standards for Medicaid eligibility. She said programs like Tricare no longer disqualify families from garnering other types of insurance because TennCare and Medicaid are no longer considered a “payer of last resort” reserved for those with no insurance. Now, the state takes gross income, not net income, into account.

“Medicaid is not subjective in that way — it is very objective and takes into account family size, available resources and gross income to see if (people) fit into a Medicaid category,” Wilson said.

Another state program called Safety Net could come to the rescue for families like the Ortizes by helping them navigate the health care system.

“Safety Net is an existing program that helps TennCare disenrollees, the uninsured and others with the medical services they need,” said Andrea White, communications director for Safety Net and Cover Tennessee.

The program helps families find additional resources Tennesseans may not have known about, and health social workers with Safety Net can also negotiate doctor and hospital costs.

As the family investigates these and other resources, they keep their good spirits and remain close. But the Ortiz parents can see how health and money issues can strain relationships.

“We don’t want to argue or blame each other, but we need the money to go toward the bankruptcy and the things we need for the baby. We can’t get the things we need,” Elvira said.

“I get so emotional because it’s so frustrating to have talked to so many people. I want to know more. How do people get help?”

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