

FROM 1A

Memories fill emptiness of first holiday season

FAMILIES From Page 6A



At some point around Christmas, Ann Mulkey will drive to the ruins of the Sofa Super Store and park her minivan beside the chain link that surrounds the rubble. There, she will say

a few words to her fallen son and then offer a prayer.

Mulkey knows it might sound strange to some. But she finds solace in the place where her son, Capt. Louis Mulkey, lost his life on a humid night.

"It's a horrible sight to see, yes, but then that is where they died," Mulkey said. "That is where I feel him more."

In her mind, she blocks out the wreckage and envisions a memorial on the charred ground. She pictures a structure resembling a fire station with rooms for a museum and visiting firefighters and their families to stay.

On Christmas, Louis Mulkey would frequently fill in for other firefighters so they could spend time with their children. But he often made it home for a Christmas Eve dinner.

"We're still devastated and we will be for a long time," Ann Mulkey said. "It's going to be very hard this Christmas."

They still feel Louis' presence around them. Mulkey and her oldest son, Wayne, sometimes mistake strangers on the street for Louis, if just for a second. "I just see him everywhere I go," Wayne said to his mother.

Mike Mulkey finds himself expecting his son to come through the front door.

Louis' parents find some comfort in going to the Summerville High School games their son would have coached and meeting with the kids who looked up to him. They visit Louis' grave each



WADE SPEES/STAFF

When Mark Davis drove past the Sofa Super Store on Thursday and saw Louis Mulkey's parents there, the Charleston Fire Department captain stopped to see them. "It's been so wonderful," Ann Mulkey said about contributions to firefighter families and the memorial services. "People have been so wonderful throughout this whole ordeal."

week. His mom stops by the site of the fire whenever she can.

It started the week after Louis' death. She and a friend walked along the sidewalk lined with floral wreaths. As she neared a utility pole a wreath fell at her feet. "That's Louis," Ann Mulkey told her friend. "He doesn't want me to leave." So we stayed, we stayed for a while.

The family of Capt. William "Billy" Hutchinson III won't be gathering at their mother's house for Christmas



like they would have done in previous years, Billy's brother, Randy, said recently. With the loss of his brother in the Sofa Super Store fire, the day wouldn't hold the same meaning.

Randy Hutchinson is also closely watching how the investigation of the fire goes. He expressed some anger that more than six months after the fire,

the comprehensive report on the blaze hasn't been released.

"If it wasn't willful lack of command, then what was it?" he said of the conduct outside the store that night, adding, "All that matters is the first 30 minutes of the fire."

Capt. Hutchinson, 48, was the most senior firefighter in years of service — 30 years — to die at the Sofa Super Store.

Phyllis Hutchinson, the mother of two of Billy's three daughters, said they will stick with a traditional Christmas but also seek to honor the father the girls lost. "We have a lot of firemen ornaments

and we'll put them on the tree," she said. They also plan to take poinsettia flowers to Billy's graveside.



Christine Prevatte will ride her motorcycle alone. The phone call to Indiana won't come. "It's very depressing," she said. "I know all the families' members feel that way. It's very lonely."

Christmas for firefighter Mark Kelsey would have been a long ride on the chopper he loved, with his girlfriend riding alongside. He'd call home to Indiana and speak to each member of his family. He'd ask his two brothers how they fared with deer hunting and make sure he could anticipate a package of summer sausage in the mail.

Kelsey had made the trip back to Indiana once since he moved to Charleston. He hated the cold and snow. He'd celebrate with Christine, in their apartment.

She hasn't had the heart to decorate this year, except to hang an ornament her parents gave her on the portrait of Mark that she keeps. It's a dove, with an inscription that says the ones you miss are still with you in spirit.



Brad Baity, who served as an engineer at Station No. 16, left behind his wife, Heather, and a young son, Noah. The Marine Corps veteran had been a firefighter for nine years.

Family seeks clues, closure

JAYDA From Page 1A

Jayda couldn't recall details of the incident before her death. Evidence left at the scene suggests that the vehicle that hit Jayda was black and that it lost its driver's side mirror in the impact. Beyond that, investigators have little to go on, police spokesman Spencer Pryor said.

Jayda's husband, Kevin Stambaugh Jr., is a petty officer third class in the Navy. In the coming weeks, he must return to the aircraft carrier Harry Truman, which is deployed to the Persian Gulf. He hopes to see an arrest in his wife's death before he leaves.

"I can understand if someone has an accident," he said, gritting his teeth. "But you don't just drive off and leave someone like that."

Jayda and her husband had been married just 14 months. They crossed paths in June 2006 while he was assigned to the Charleston Naval Weapons Station for training. They met at Hooters, where she was a waitress. She was pretty, sweet and funny and shared his love of R&B music and Michigan football. A first date at Frankie's Fun Park led to a whirlwind courtship and marriage four months later.

When Stambaugh was deployed to the Gulf in November, they decided Jayda would stay with her family in Summerville. Upon his return in June, they would move to Norfolk, Va., where the Truman is based. In the meantime, she continued to work as a receptionist at a Jedburg heating and air company. To pass time, she also picked up a bartending job at a club on Ashley Phosphate Road.

Kevin was at sea in the Mediterranean when he received word of Jayda's injuries.



He spent two days traveling to get home, constantly checking on his bride, who lay in intensive care at Medical University Hospital.

"Kevin called a lot," Harris said. "Sometimes, when we didn't have an update for him, he would just sit on the phone and listen."

As the days passed, Jayda improved. She woke and conversed with her family. Through the pain and injuries, she showed signs of her old self. Her family's hopes soared when doctors announced she would be moved to HealthSouth, a rehabilitation hospital in North Charleston. It seemed she was out of the woods, Harris said.

Jayda had trouble remembering things and often was confused. She thought she was in Germany at times and complained of the strange-tasting European water. She told her mother that she had trouble distinguishing her dreams from reality. But the doctors explained that a bad head injury could cause such side effects, Harris said. "She was confused, but she was laughing and joking," she said. "She was herself."

Stambaugh and Harris began to celebrate. "I was thinking, 'She'll be home in a couple of weeks and then I'll be able to take care of her,'" Stambaugh said.

Jayda called her mother at about 6 in the morning on Dec. 9. "She told me the doctors there were done with her. I said 'Are you sure?' She said 'Oh yeah.'"

When Harris asked to speak with Jayda's

nurse, Jayda complained of a bad headache and said she was going to take a nap. The staff called Harris about four hours later and told her that Jayda had passed out and needed to be moved to another hospital.

As the day wore on, Jayda slipped into a coma. Doctors discovered bleeding on her brain that had gone undetected, Harris said. Her condition worsened. She died the next day.

The Charleston County Coroner's Office said Jayda died from complications from injuries she received in the hit-and-run. They declined to comment further because the case remains under investigation.

Stambaugh and Jayda's family remain in shock at her sudden passing and angry that no one has been held accountable for the hit-and-run that led to her death.

Harris said she went days without sleeping before taking medication to get some rest. The Christmas tree the family put up after Thanksgiving sits unlit and ignored. No one feels like celebrating.

Harris and Stambaugh also have been frustrated by the lack of information they've received from police. Stambaugh said he'd had trouble getting investigators to return his phone calls.

Pryor said police had not contacted the family recently because there was no new information to pass on. After learning of the family's concerns, police quickly called Stambaugh on Friday to update him on the case.

Harris said she just wants justice for her eldest daughter. She hopes the driver responsible for the hit-and-run will surrender, accept responsibility and display a conscience, she said.

"I can understand someone being afraid and driving off, but afterward, just show you have some compassion... something," she said. "In order for Jayda to rest in peace, she needs to have some closure."

Reach **Glenn Smith** at 937-5556 or gsmith@postandcourier.com.

2 will stay out of the fray

HEAVYWEIGHTS From Page 1A

from his family.

As the state's most prominent black politician, Clyburn's endorsement could prove pivotal in what's shaping up here as a close Democratic contest between Sens. Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama — both of whom have aggressively courted the black vote.

As governor, Sanford is the state's most visible Republican to not jump in.

Asked Friday if he planned to remain neutral, he replied, "You never say never in the world of politics, but essentially I've said never."

Sanford said he has had pleasant visits with several of the candidates, and he said the closeness of the race — no fewer than six GOP hopefuls have polled above 10 percent at times — is a reflection of the party's lingering turmoil following its nationwide basting in the 2006 elections.

"I think this unrest, this inability of the Republican electorate to lock in behind one candidate, is a function as much as anything of the times that we're in, and the degree of frustration that conservatives have felt with the Republican Party in general, as it is where any of the candidates are," he said.

Unlike Clyburn, Sanford said he hasn't made up his mind. "I'm probably as undecided as everyone else," he said. "I think there is something interesting going on out there which is a whole lot of soul searching by people in the conservative movement and by Republicans."

South Carolina's Democrats, who were some of the few nationwide unable to capitalize on the nation's dissatisfaction with Republicans, hope to rebuild their party by relying on early presidential primaries to identify and energize their base.

Clyburn said if he were to weigh in dur-

ing the presidential campaign, that could make national Democrats more hostile to the state's early status.

"A lot of people try to use that against South Carolina — the fact that if I were to endorse, it would ruin the integrity of the primary. The South Carolina Democratic Party thought it would work against rebuilding the party if I did."

Clyburn also said state lawmakers, who recently agreed to pay for the cost of holding the presidential primaries, also might be unhappy with him if he were to back a candidate. "I think I would be breaking faith with the South Carolina General Assembly if I were to get involved. I'm sort of checkmated."

Clyburn said he thinks he knows who he will vote for, but that could change if the candidate were to stumble seriously in Iowa or New Hampshire.

"There are only two issues in this campaign," he said. "No. 1, who can best change the direction of this country. This country is on the wrong track... The second issue is: Who has the best chance of winning? When you get beyond those two things, all the rest of it you can fill in."

As leaders of their respective parties, Sanford and Clyburn both have another good reason to remain above the fray, University of South Carolina political science professor Blease Graham said.

"There's the potential for divisiveness," he said. "I think these two individuals as party leaders, active in office, would want to stay apart from what could be an internecine war — or battles within the party."

"Each of them respectively has influence, but as leaders, I think they're saving their most meaningful influence for the general election."

Reach **Robert Behre** at 937-5771 or rbehre@postandcourier.com.

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