

POLICE & FIRE

Police Continue to Investigate Fatal Car Fire on River Road

Neighbors said family that lived at 550 River Road consisted of a married couple and two children; witness reports 'gas cans blowing up,' glass breaking.

By **Zach Subar** April 12, 2010

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UPDATE: 6:25 p.m. The Morris County Prosecutor's Office is investigating the burning death of a person in a fire in an automobile Monday afternoon on River Road in Chatham.

Firefighters rushed to a garage at 550 River Road around 1:15 p.m. and extinguished the flames. A nearby worker said he heard someone in the car screaming.

Emergency officials on scene said the car had been reduced to a shell by the fire, and said the fire could have potentially begun in the garage. But Chatham Township Police Department officers are on scene investigating the fire with Morris County Sheriff's Office officials and have not yet determined a cause.

"I heard somebody yelling 'Help, help,'" said John Strelkoff, who owns Bottle Hill Window in Madison and was cleaning windows nearby at 548 River Road. "I saw what looked like a body on fire."

"I tried to grab some towels and blankets but no one could get inside because the heat was too close," Strelkoff said.

Strelkoff continued: "At first it wasn't super intense. It looked like the back wall the front of the car and the sides were starting to burn, but even at that point, the heat was so intense and then things started popping, maybe gas cans blowing up, glass started breaking, and then the flames got really big and smoke started pouring out.

"I was afraid of the heat. I was also afraid that the fuel tank was going to blow up," Strelkoff said. (A video Strelkoff took of the fire is at right.)

He said the fire didn't spread beyond the house but said even after fire officials got the blaze under control, they had to keep going back to the home because the fire kept reigniting. One off-duty firefighter, Strelkoff said, had told him that because the flames were so hot, it would have been near-impossible to get anyone out alive.

Neighbors nearby said the family that lived at 550 River consisted of a married couple and two children.

Township police officers directed all press inquiries to the county Prosecutor's Office, which has not yet identified the person who died. But neighbors who arrived at the scene said they had heard it had been the mother who died in the blaze.

Neighbors said the family hadn't lived in the home for more than a few years. Sylvia Ryan, who lives at 536 River, came home at about 4 p.m. She had heard from fellow neighbors about the fire before she arrived.

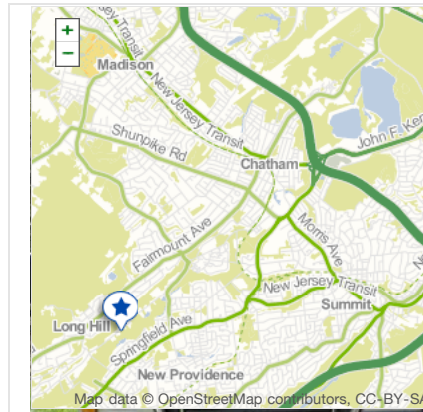
"They haven't been here long," Ryan said. "They were a Russian couple. I really don't know anything about them ... I just see their decorations at Christmastime."

As she spoke, she shook her head. "Oh, wow," she said. Soon afterward, American Red Cross Colonial Crossroads Chapter Emergency Services Director Barb Flynn went over to console Ryan. Several Red Cross officials were on scene.

Chapter Public Relations Director Mary Schaenen said the organization could potentially provide care and housing to family members of the victim, and was generally there to assist people nearby.

A long line of emergency vehicles that stretched over a quarter mile was parked all along River Road near where the fire occurred, and yellow police tape cordoned off the scene.

The entire front facade of the towering home, which is made up of siding, has been blackened by



Emergency vehicles stretched for nearly half a mile at the scene.

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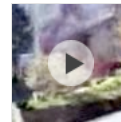
VIDEOS (1)



PHOTOS



VIDEOS



smoke, and officials said they will likely be on scene investigating until nightfall.

According to Trulia, a real estate search engine, the home was built in 1928 and is 2,254 square feet.

The road has been blocked off near the site of the fire. Representatives of the Morris County Prosecutor's Office were at the scene, along with firefighters from the Chatham Township Volunteer Fire Dept., the Chatham Borough Fire Dept., the Summit Fire Dept. and the Green Village Volunteer Fire Dept. The Chatham Emergency Squad responded to the fire.

Officials from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives also arrived on scene about three hours after the fire began.



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