

04-08-2001 – Butler PA - **Anthony Murdick and Scott Wilson** FF PSD –
Swift Water Accident - Trapped

4/15/01 Line of Duty Death – Pennsylvania

<http://www.firefightinglinks.com/2001-04-news.html>



I would like to extend my condolences to the Murdick, Wilson, and Unionville Volunteer Fire Department families.

Assistant Chief Anthony Murdick, 25, and FireFighter-Paramedic Scott Wilson, 25, of the Unionville Volunteer Fire Department Dive Team, PA, lost their lives Sunday, April 8, 2001, while trying to recover a submerged kayaker.



Our brother Anthony left a fiancée, Beth, and a son, Talan. Our brother Scott left a wife, Tracy, and a son, Cole. A memorial fund has been set up at Citizens National Bank. Donations can be made to:

Unionville Volunteer Fire Department
Memorial Fund
Citizens National Bank
196 Clearview Circle
Butler, PA 16001



Anthony V. Murdick

<https://www.firehero.org/fallen-firefighter/anthony-v-murdick/>

Assistant Chief
Unionville Volunteer Fire Company Inc., Butler
Pennsylvania
Age: 25
Year of Death: 2001



Anthony V. Murdick, 25, assistant Chief, Unionville Volunteer Fire Company, Inc., Butler, died April 8, 2001, while attempting to recover the body of a kayaker trapped in a swift-moving current. He and firefighter Scott Wilson, who also died in this incident, joined the department's Junior Firefighter Program together when they were both 16. The father of a young son, Murdick was an advanced diver who was only a few months away from qualifying as a master diver.

He once said that having a child was the best thing he ever did with his life.



Scott B. Wilson

<https://www.firehero.org/fallen-firefighter/scott-b-wilson/>

- **Firefighter/Paramedic**
- **Unionville Volunteer Fire Company Inc., Butler**
- **Pennsylvania**
- **Age: 25**
- **Year of Death: 2001**

Scott was my best friend. He had been a member of the Unionville VFC for 9 years. Scott was the former Dive Team Coordinator and held a lieutenant position for 2 years. He had recently graduated from the Pennsylvania Police Academy in February and was employed part-time at the Butler County Prison as a corrections officer. Scott was the Protective Services Instructor at the Butler County Areas Vocation Technical School.



He lived for his family-wife Tracy and son Cole who was 6 months old when Scott lost his life attempting to recover the body of a submerged kayaker at McConnell's Mills State Park.

He was the son of Gene and Sandra Wilson. Scott has a brother Kirk and maternal grandparents Walt and Jean Hoover, all of whom he was very close to.

Scott's recent accomplishments also included becoming a State Fire Academy Instructor. In addition to teaching at the Vo-Tech, Scott also taught at area hospitals and colleges. Scott had been a paramedic for 6 years. He died the way he lived-Giving his all!

Scott is sadly missed and will never be forgotten.

Tracy Wilson



<https://apps.usfa.fema.gov/firefighter-fatalities/fatalityData/detail?fatalityId=823>

Anthony Vaughn Murdick Scott Brian Wilson

Members of the Unionville Volunteer Fire Company responded to perform a body recovery of a kayaker who had drowned and become trapped under water about 20 feet from shore in 15 feet of water.

The department responded to the request of officials at the McConnell's Mills State Park. After arrival on-scene and an assessment of several recovery scenarios, Assistant Chief Murdick and Firefighter/Paramedic Wilson entered the water to perform the recovery. The firefighters were tethered together and secured to a rope line held by firefighters on shore.

Both firefighters were wearing wetsuits and buoyancy control devices called "back inflates." Within minutes of entering the water, Firefighter/Paramedic Wilson's safety rope became entangled with an underwater object.

Assistant Chief Murdick also became entangled.

The rapid current made working in the water difficult. Ropes were thrown from shore to the two firefighters, but these efforts were unsuccessful.

Firefighters on shore attempted to pull the struggling firefighters to shore, but this effort was also unsuccessful. Approximately after 20 minutes of rescue efforts, both firefighters submerged. When it became apparent that the firefighters could not be pulled from the water, the safety line was cut.

Approximately ten minutes after being cut free, the bodies of both firefighters appeared about 200 yards downstream.

Both firefighters were pulseless and not breathing. ALS-level medical care was provided on-scene and enroute to the hospital by air ambulance. Despite these efforts, both firefighters were pronounced dead at the hospital.

The cause of death for both firefighters was listed as drowning. The firefighters were not equipped with knives that might have allowed them to free themselves. Darkness and a faster than expected stream current were cited as contributing to the firefighters' deaths.

Rafter, Divers Drown In State Park Creek

<http://www.wtaetv.com/pit/news/stories/news-61160120010409-080424.html>

April 9, 2001

Body Has Not Been Recovered

PORTERSVILLE, Pa. -- Two fire department divers from Butler and the kayaker who they were trying to reach drowned in a creek at a state park.

The 23-year-old kayaker struck a submerged log, flipping his kayak Sunday in Slippery Rock Creek at McConnell's Mill State Park, police said. The kayaker, whose name had not been released Monday, became trapped underwater by a fast current.

Anthony Murdick and Scott Wilson, both 25, of Unionville Volunteer Fire Department, drowned while trying to reach the man. Their bodies were recovered about a half-mile downstream, police said.

Fire Chief Mark Lauer said that it was unclear what caused the divers' difficulties.

"The creek was high and fast," he said.

The kayaker's body had not been recovered Monday. A trooper answering the telephone at the state police barracks in New Castle said that divers from Allegheny County were expected to continue the search for the diver.

The park is about 40 miles north of Pittsburgh.

Murdick and Wilson were veteran members of the Unionville department, which routinely responds to rescue and recovery missions to McConnell's Mill and nearby Moraine State Park, officials said.

The events began unfolding at about 6 p.m. in Slippery Rock Township, when the boater struck a log. Another boater exited the water to alert officials.

About 8 p.m., the divers arrived. By that time, the kayaker was presumed dead, authorities told the *Butler Eagle* for a story Monday.

With a line tethered between the two divers and a longer safety rope connected from them to shore, Murdick and Wilson entered the water without scuba equipment. Lauer told the *Eagle* that he did not know why they made the decision to search for the kayaker without breathing apparatus.

"I just knew something was very wrong. It wasn't good," said Lauer, who was driving to the scene when he heard on the emergency radio the divers were having problems.

"Tony was bringing (Wilson) back to the safety raft when something happened. We believe the tether line that held them together got caught on something and pulled them both down," Lauer told the newspaper.

Attempts to pull the divers out with safety ropes failed, Lauer said.

"It brings the department together, even though it tears you up," Lauer said. Slippery Rock Fire Chief Philip Dean said that the water and the current simply overpowered the divers.

"That could be anywhere from six feet to 30 feet or deeper than even that," Dean told the *New Castle News* on Monday. "With the rain that we had the day before the current was very strong. The creek was up about two feet from normal."

Dean said that volunteers at the scene were shocked by the divers' deaths.

"We work together as much as possible to try to help each other to save others' lives," he said. "The loss of two volunteers like that is a real strong shock to the volunteer community."

Lauer said that Unionville firefighters would not be part of the efforts to recover the kayaker's body because of the divers' deaths -- which were the first time any department firefighter has been killed in the line of service since the department was opened about 30 years ago.

Murdick, who worked as a laborer at Eisler's Nursery in Worth Township, had a 14-month-old son and was recently engaged. Wilson had been married for about a year and had a 6-month-old son. He worked as a teacher at the Butler County Area Vocational-Technical School.

Lawrence County commissioners asked county residents and businesses to fly flags at half mast for 30 days in memory of the divers.

Rafter, Rescue Divers Drown in Pa.

04-09-01 The Associated Press NY

ELLWOOD CITY, Pa. (AP) - Two fire department divers and the kayaker they were trying to rescue drowned in a creek at a state park near Pittsburgh.

The 23-year-old man struck a submerged log, flipping his kayak Sunday in Slippery Rock Creek at McConnell's Mill State Park, police said. The kayaker, whose name was not immediately released, became trapped underwater by a fast current.

Anthony Murdick and Scott Wilson, both 25, of the Unionville Volunteer Fire Department drowned while trying to save the man. Their bodies were recovered about a half-mile downstream, police said.

Fire Chief Mark Lauer said it was unclear what caused the divers' difficulties, but ``the creek was high and fast."

The divers entered the water without scuba equipment. A line was tethered between the two men and a longer safety rope was connected to shore.

``We believe the tether line that held them together got caught on something and pulled them both down," Lauer said.

The kayaker's body was not yet recovered as of Monday morning.

The park is about 40 miles north of Pittsburgh.

Divers killed trying to find boater's body

http://pittsburghlive.com/news/news_story.html?rkey=112148+sid=84eec6ac6a4f184b373be88a12d40754+cat=news-regional-pghstory+related_name=+template=news1.html

By Michael Hasch TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Two Butler County divers trying to recover the body of a kayaker in McConnell's Mill State Park died Sunday night when they apparently were swept away by a rapidly moving stream.

A Lawrence County rescue official said he was told a rope broke that had been securing the divers to fellow firefighters onshore.

He said he was told the two firefighters were swept away holding onto each other in the fast-moving creek. The two apparently were alive when they were reached by fellow rescue workers.

Another rescue worker said the two men were in cardiac arrest when a medical helicopter crew from Stat MedEvac arrived and flew them to Ellwood City Hospital, where they died.

The official, who asked not to be identified, said the deaths "hit close to home" and were particularly difficult for rescue workers because of how closely the crews work together.

The two divers were identified by fellow firefighters as members of the Unionville Volunteer Fire Department in Butler County. Unionville is about 10 miles north of Butler on Route 8.

The accident happened in Slippery Rock Creek in Perry Township, Lawrence County, where the kayaker was reported trapped underneath a tree in the water.

Neither the kayaker nor the firefighters were identified early this morning.

The body of the missing kayaker - who is believed to be a resident of Aliquippa, Beaver County - had not been recovered, an official said.

The official said recent heavy rains brought on dangerous water conditions.

"With the rain we've been getting, the rapids that are up in that area can get fairly bad and were probably too much for them," he said.

"The one thing that's very deceiving about rapids is that the areas between the rocks and the boulders are extremely deep. Even very skilled kayakers can get trapped between rocks and pulled down and get sucked down into areas that are very deep and very dark," the official said.

Two Penn. Firefighters Drown In River Rescue Attempt

http://www.firehouse.com/lodd/2001/pa_apr9.html

04-09-2001 LON SLEPICKA Firehouse.com News

Interact: [Post/View Condolences](#)

Two members of the Unionville Center Township Volunteer Fire Company died Sunday while trying to reach a trapped kayaker in Slippery Rock Creek at McConnell's Mill State Park.

Assistant Chief Anthony Murdick and FF/Paramedic Scott Wilson, both 25 and members of the department's Water Rescue and Dive Team were called to the area to assist the Slippery Rock Township VFD in Lawrence County when a white water kayaker became trapped.

Unionville Chief Mark Lauer said the response team consisted of five divers and three tenders to assist in operations. Murdick and Wilson were fitted in wetsuits and helmets and inflatable buoyancy vests. There were no boats involved. The area "is all repelling in and out, tough stuff," he said.

According to Lauer, when they got to the scene they could see part of the submerged kayak and Murdick and Wilson went in the water. "Wilson became distressed like he was hooked up on something. Murdick was bringing him in when something happened," he said.

Both were connected by line to the shore but a failure caused them to be swept under by the current. "I think the autopsy will show they both drowned," Lauer said. The kayaker's body has yet to be recovered.

Lauer said both were well trained with multiple incidents under their belts. Murdick would have qualified as a dive master this summer.

Murdick and Wilson joined the Junior Firefighter Program of the department when they were 16 according to Lauer. They had graduated together from Butler Area Jr. Sr. High School.

Scott Wilson is survived by his wife Tracy and six-month-old son Cole. He taught public safety in the school system.

Anthony Murdick is survived by his fiancée Beth and their 14 month-old-son Talon. He was in the landscaping business.

Firehouse.com will post information when available concerning funeral arrangements. Lauer said they would plan a full firefighter funeral for both.

Unionville Center Township Volunteer Fire Company has about 40 members and handles 350-375 incidents per year. The Water Rescue and Dive Team handles calls throughout a wide surrounding area.

Harmar rescue group recovers kayaker's body

http://triblive.com/x/valleynewsdispatch/s_39156.html

April 10, 2001 JEFF JONES

SLIPPERY ROCK TWP: Divers from a Harmar-based rescue group and a Lower Burrell fire department recovered the body of a kayaker from Slippery Rock Creek in McConnell's Mills State Park on Monday.

Two Unionville divers were killed Sunday night trying to recover the body of kayaker Neil Balcer, 23, of Ambridge.

Air Search Rescue divers, with help from Braeburn Fire Department divers, recovered Balcer's body about eight hours after being called out early Monday.

The original call for help was placed about 6 p.m. Sunday when another boater saw Balcer's kayak flip and alerted officials.

His kayak had struck a submerged log, flipping it and trapping him underwater in a strong current, police said.

Divers from Unionville Volunteer Fire Department arrived about 8 p.m. Sunday.

Two Unionville volunteer firemen, Anthony Murdick and Scott Wilson, both 25, were swept away and killed Sunday night after entering Slippery Rock Creek to recover the kayaker.

The divers' deaths were the first on-duty fatalities for the 50-person volunteer fire department whose 16 divers serve McConnell's Mill and Moraine state parks.

The Unionville divers' bodies were found about a half mile downstream.

The divers were taken to Ellwood City Hospital and pronounced dead at 10:50 p.m. Sunday.

'They called us at 3 a.m.,' said Anthony Rozzano, commanding officer for Air Search Rescue. 'No one would go into the water.'

Rozzano sent three crime scene underwater investigators to assess the situation. Around 6 a.m. the rest of the Air Search Rescue dive team, about 25 divers, went to Slippery Rock Creek along with divers from the Braeburn Fire Department.

Divers used underwater cameras attached to 30-foot poles to find the submerged body 10 feet below rapids and under a tree.

The body surfaced in the rapids and floated down the river about a half-mile, Rozzano said. Rescue crews had nets set up and divers in the calmer water to retrieve the body.

'It brings closure to the family,' Rozzano said. 'You never get used to it.'

Investigators hope to learn from men's deaths

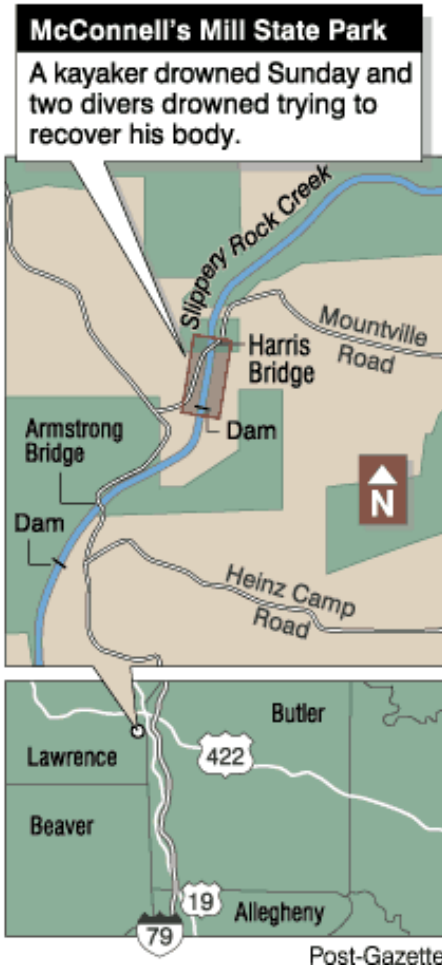
<http://www.post-gazette.com/regionstate/20010410drownings3.asp>

April 10, 2001 By Bill Heltzel, Post-Gazette Staff Writer

Creek tragedy cause may remain mystery

Two rescue divers may have misjudged how treacherous Slippery Rock Creek had become during the spring thaw before they tried to recover the body of a kayaker Sunday and died themselves.

Investigators may never know precisely what went wrong. But as rescue teams labored yesterday to free the body of kayaker Neil Balcer from the



McConnell's Mill State Park
 A kayaker drowned Sunday and two divers drowned trying to recover his body.

rapids, their thoughts were not far from the two men who had tried, and failed, the day before. Many of the rescuers had known or worked with Anthony V. Murdick and Scott B. Wilson, 25-year-old divers with the Unionville Volunteer Fire Department.

Wilson was engaged and had a 14-month-old son. He taught protective services occupational classes at the Butler County Area Vocational Technical School.

As a volunteer firefighter, he "brought a wealth of experience," said school director Dr. Joseph Cunningham.

Murdick was married and had a 6-month-old son. His father was a former fire chief.

Balcer had put into the creek Sunday with two friends, a father and son, at Eckert Bridge in McConnell's Mill State Park, 40 miles north of Pittsburgh. Police did not identify the father and son, who are reportedly from the Slippy Rock area. Balcer, 23, of Boyers, Butler County, grew up Ambridge and was a student

at Slippy Rock State University.

All three were inexperienced kayakers, a park official said, having taken a course a few months ago, possibly in a swimming pool.

Slippy Rock Creek is classified as a Class 2 to Class 3 stream.

"Class 3 rapids are not for novices," said R. Scott Domowicz, director of operations of Air Search Rescue, a volunteer group headquartered in Harmar.

The three men paddled for Harris Bridge near Mountville Road, where they were going to leave the creek. But about 200 yards upstream from the bridge, Balcer ran into trouble.



At the Unionville Volunteer Fire Department, volunteers yesterday honored Anthony V. Murdick and Scott B. Wilson, comrades who died trying to recover a kayaker's body on Sunday. Here, firefighter Jeff Raab places flowers next to the memorial for the men - the only ones to die in the fire company's history.

(Darrell Sapp, Post-Gazette)

A large tree limb was partly submerged in the creek. Experienced kayakers know to avoid such obstacles, because they can create a dangerous condition known as a strainer, in which water rushes forcefully around the limb.

Balcer was unable to avoid the limb. One of the other kayakers told park manager Obie Derr that Balcer's kayak flipped in the rapids, and he was unable to right it. It drifted into the limb and wedged beneath it.

The other two kayakers tried to rescue him. One grabbed his life jacket but it came off.

At 4:28 p.m. the Slippery Rock Township Volunteer Fire Department was notified of a "man pinned under rocks at the bridge," said Chief Philip Dean.

When volunteers arrived, it was clear that Balcer was dead and trapped in the kayak beneath the limb. Several volunteer fire departments were called for backup.

"When we need a dive team," Dean said, "we call Unionville."

A half-dozen divers arrived, and the rescue workers began planning the recovery of Balcer's body.

The current was running at 2.5 knots or faster. A diver can swim against no more than 1.8 knots.

The body and the kayak were about 20 feet from shore in about 15 feet of water, and rescuers anchored a floating platform upstream from the limb. By some accounts, the divers could wade into the water for a few feet. But then the creek deepens and there is no sure footing.

Their strategy was to tie a rope on the kayak or body and then pull it to shore, Dean said.

About 8 p.m., Murdick and Wilson attempted a recovery.

Both were good and experienced divers, said Domowicz, but he didn't know whether they had training in swift-water rescues.

Both divers wore wet suits, buoyancy-compensation vests and harnesses that were tethered to the shore. They were not wearing air tanks, fins, or regulators, and were not carrying cutting tools, all of which are considered standard gear for swift water rescues.

Domowicz said he would not second-guess that decision. He said they may have decided that tanks would restrict their mobility. Plus, he said, the river was deceptive.

"It looks easy to get to [the kayak] in the current."

What happened next was unclear. Investigators began piecing together eyewitness accounts yesterday; and the following accounts had not been fully corroborated.

Dean said the divers seemed to have gotten hung up on something in the water, and the current began to pull them under. The Unionville fire department said in a press release that Wilson "became distressed and was being assisted back to a floating platform."

The men were floundering, their heads still above water, but their harnesses were pulling them under.

Then, perhaps succumbing to the cold water, exhaustion and the force of the current, the men went under.

Their comrades cut their ropes, in the hope the men would pop up or save themselves. Instead, they were carried downstream, perhaps submerged the whole way. They washed ashore below the Harris Bridge.

They were flown to Ellwood City Hospital, where they were pronounced dead at 10:50 p.m.

Air Search Rescue was called in to help recover Balcer's body. Domowicz and his team arrived at 3 a.m. and began staging a complex, dangerous operation.

Then they devised a plan. They would tie a rope onto the limb and cut the other end, allowing the rest of the limb to swing open like a door and dislodge the kayak and body.

Preparations took several hours.

Back at the Unionville fire department, the volunteers honored their fallen comrades. Wilson and Murdick were the first in its history to die in the line of duty. Their pictures and uniforms were set up on a table outside. The station bell was rung 14 times, the company's number.

Shortly after noon, Balcer's family gathered on the bridge. Some held small crosses made of palm fronds. The Rev. Ben Vaghetto of St. Vincent DePaul Church in New Castle read prayers and comforted them.

At 1:03 p.m., a horn sounded to alert rescue teams. But before a crew could cut the limb, their weight on the limb dislodged the kayak. It bobbed up, drifted downstream, and was corralled at 1:06 p.m.

But there was no body, and rescuers weren't sure where it was.

It was still in the first set of rapids, under the limb. At 1:41 p.m., the horn sounded again. The limb was cut. The body was freed.

As it drifted downstream, some family members wept, some held their heads in anguish. A young woman dropped a red rose into the creek.

A crew in a motor boat pulled the body out.

Air Search Rescue, as well as investigators from the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission, state police and the state parks bureau, were investigating.

"What should have been a normal trip down the river turned into a disaster," Domowicz said. "We hope to learn something from these deaths in the hope that they did not die in vain."

Staff writer Antonio Gilb contributed to this report.

Swift water rescues keep divers on edge

<http://www.post-gazette.com/regionstate/20010410diversreq6.asp>

April 10, 2001 By Marylyne Pitz, Post-Gazette Staff Writer

Rescuing kayakers or recovering bodies from swift water requires specialized training, but scuba-diving equipment is not usually necessary.

Most river accidents can be handled without using scuba gear, according to Gordon Black, director of safety education and instruction for the American Canoe Association in Springfield, Va.

"Often, scuba is a bad idea. You've got more stuff to get caught, more stuff to get snagged on, more things to hinder your mobility. In most cases, it's very, very rarely used in river rescue."

Eyewitnesses say two fire department divers who died Sunday trying reach a kayaker at McConnell's Mill State Park were not wearing diving fins, masks or air tanks. Anthony Murdick and Scott Wilson, both 25, of the Unionville Fire Department, are presumed to have drowned.

The question, Black said, is: "Were these rescuers trained in swift-water rescue? That's a really, really big issue. Untrained people trying to effect a rescue in swift waters are really asking for trouble."

Unionville fire officials would not detail what kind of training Murdick and Wilson had.

Mark McCarty, assistant chief of the Ohiopyle Volunteer Fire Department, also owns Laurel Highlands River Tours, which guides tours on the Youghiogheny and Cheat rivers.

In a rescue or recovery, McCarty won't proceed if he thinks there is a risk to someone's life or limbs.

"There are a number of rope rescue classes and formats that are taught in how to lower someone into a river in a more than safe manner. They take time to set up and they don't work in all situations," McCarty said.

The elements can overcome the most experienced rescuers, too.

"There's always the unknown. Is there another tree, another log?"

The recovery attempted by the Unionville firefighters began around 8 p.m., leaving them with little daylight.

"At 8 o'clock, you're starting to lose your window on daylight. At this time of the year, I like to have the situation under control by 8 p.m.," McCarty said.

"Along a river, it's hard to bring in rescue trucks to bring in portable lighting. There are times when rescue teams could have delayed it till morning."

The firefighters who died trying to recover the kayaker should be commended, said Terry Palmo, vice president and general manager of Laurel Highlands River Tours.

"I give them all the credit in the world. Working with Mother Nature, you just don't know."

Kayaker lived life to fullest

http://triblive.com/news/news_story.html?rkey=112363+sid=89ffbaffaf62b6d3464208c64c722a69+cat=news-regional-pghstory+related_name=dive10+exclude=2+template=news1.html
04-10-00 **By Mark Berton TRIBUNE-REVIEW**

Neil Balcer's love of life was evident in everything from his hobbies, including kayaking, to his choice of career as a teacher.

"What I liked the most about Neil was that he was a live and creative young man," said John Bleyer, a professor at St. Vincent College who knew Balcer as an educator and a friend. "I was looking forward to him being certified as a teacher and being in a classroom with children."

Balcer, 23, of Marion Township, Butler County, died Sunday while kayaking in the fast-moving Slippery Rock Creek at McConnell's Mill State Park, Lawrence County. Two volunteer firefighters drowned while searching for his body.

Balcer, the only son of Dan and Carol Jean Balcer of Ambridge, had an infant son, Caleb Dylan.

Carol Jean Balcer said her son was passionate about aquatic activities, especially kayaking.

"He was passionate about a lot of things. He loved the water, whether it's fly fishing or kayaking," she said. "It's been a pastime of his for the last year. Just as a warning to other kayakers: You think it's fun at first. It's dangerous and it's treacherous, especially after a rain."

Neil Balcer lived in Marion Township, near Slippery Rock, where he was a student teacher at Slippery Rock Elementary School. He graduated from St. Vincent College in Latrobe in 2000 and was doing post-graduate work.

Elizabeth Balser, Balcer's education adviser at St. Vincent, said he would have made an excellent teacher.

"He just loved children so much, and he was just so full of life," she said.

Neil Balcer started as a student teacher in January. He first taught third-graders and more recently was teaching fifth-graders.

"He had a real enthusiasm for teaching and children. He had a real zest for life," said Ron Cokaine, principal of Slippery Rock Elementary School. "I was always impressed with his friendliness. He had a great rapport with the kids and staff."

Balcer was to finish his student teaching in two weeks, Cokaine said.

Cokaine said the students were told Monday morning of Balcer's death. He said the students were distraught, and counseling was offered for the rest of the day.

Bleyer said Balcer had passed all of his exams and that everything "was ready to go" for him to begin job hunting.

"I had Neil in three different courses and read and worked with him on his thesis," Bleyer said. "And I established a personal relationship with Neil because I liked Neil as a person. He was a rather unique individual.

"I think that he would have interviewed well, and if there had been an elementary position, he would have been a prime candidate," Bleyer said. "He was full of life."

Carol Jean Balcer said her son lived life to the fullest.

"He's going to be missed. He loved life and he lived life," she said.

"He could have been really something special," Dan Balcer, director of A.W. Beattie Technical School in McCandless, said about his son. "He just didn't

get a break. But he lived it. He was something special. He could have been a great educator."

A Mass of Christian Burial will be said at 9:30 a.m. Friday at St. Veronica Roman Catholic Church in Ambridge.

Mark Berton can be reached at mberton@tribweb.com or (724) 779-7108. Staff writer Ellen James contributed to this report.

Firefighter kept family tradition

http://triblive.com/news/news_story.html?rkey=112367+sid=27a034afd57ca2874581beca3dbbd3f1+cat=news-regional-pghstory+related_name=dive10+exclude=3+template=news1.html

By Ellen James TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Anthony "Tony" Murdick died doing what he loved best.

"He was a very good guy, very reliable and very dedicated," said Eric French, president of Eisler Landscaping in Prospect, where Murdick worked. "All he wanted to be was a firefighter. He died doing what he loved best - that sums it up. This was a tragedy that turned into a disaster."

Murdick, 25, was one of two Unionville Volunteer Fire Company members who died Sunday while trying to recover the body of a kayaker in Slippery Rock Creek in McConnell's Mill State Park, Lawrence County.

Murdick lived most of his life in Unionville. Survivors include his 14-month son, Talon, and his fiancée, Beth McCurdy.

Murdick came from a family of firefighters. His father, Ron Murdick, had served as chief of Unionville Volunteer Fire Company. Tony, an Eagle scout, joined the department as a junior firefighter at age 18.

He rose quickly through the ranks, became an assistant fire chief and joined the fire department's specialized diving team. He also was working to become a code enforcement officer.

He was finishing classes to earn an advanced certificate in rescue diving, Chief Mark Lauer of the Unionville Volunteer Fire Company said.

Murdick was leading the rescue team into the fast-moving Slippery Rock Creek when it appears that one of the ropes securing him and his rescue partner snapped. The two men were found half-mile downstream.

"I know that firefighting was one of his passions," Lauer said. "He wanted to save lives. He wanted to teach others. It is unfortunate that he died trying to save a life."

Many remember Murdick as a man dedicated to his family and to saving lives.

"He strived to be the best he could be," Lauer said. "Firefighting was in his blood."

Lauer said that funeral arrangements have not been completed.

Ellen James can be reached at ejames@tribweb.com or (724) 779-7123.

Educator put students first

http://triblive.com/news/news_story.html?rkey=112349+sid=d33f5367818f9d93826efb9b73b3f6c9+cat=news-pittsburgh+related_name=dive10+exclude=4+template=news1.html

By Mark Berton TRIBUNE-REVIEW

To Scott Wilson, safety was not about just guidelines and practice - it was a way of life.

"He was an outstanding educator," said Joe Cunningham, director of the Butler County Area Vocational-Technical School, where Wilson was hired as a teacher in August 1999. "Always put his students first, and his students' best interests were always on his mind - providing opportunities for them."

Wilson, 25, was one of two Unionville Volunteer Fire Company members who died Sunday while trying to recover the body of a kayaker from Slippery Rock Creek in McConnell's Mill State Park, Lawrence County. Survivors include his wife, Tracy, and their 6-month-old son, Cole.

Wilson, of Unionville, taught protective services occupations at the vo-tech school, where he informed students about careers in emergency service. He previously served the school as an instructional aide.

Wilson was a recent graduate of the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Criminal Justice Training Center program at the Carnegie Mellon University satellite site in Oakland.

Gary Welsh, director of the center, said he spoke to Wilson no more than two weeks ago about his position at Butler County Vo-Tech.

"He was a very active firefighter and EMT," Welsh said, adding that Wilson indicated that he aspired to become a police officer.

"He was very, very articulate, personable - just an all-around good kid," Welsh said. "He finished up very good. He graduated from the program with a 95.6 QPA final in the academy."

Funeral arrangements have not been completed.

Mark Berton can be reached at mberton@tribweb.com or (724) 779-7108.

Ellen James can be reached at ejames@tribweb.com or (724) 779-7123.

Obituaries: Anthony Murdick and Scott Wilson / 2 young firefighters walked the same path in life, died trying to retrieve kayaker's body

<http://www.post-gazette.com/obituaries/20010411firefighters2.asp>

April 11, 2001 By Antonio Gilb, Post-Gazette Staff Writer

They led parallel lives. Anthony Murdick and Scott Wilson were Cub Scouts, Boy Scouts, Little Leaguers, Junior ROTC cadets together. They were Butler High School classmates who joined the Unionville Volunteer Fire Company as junior firefighters.

They died together Sunday night in McConnell's Mill State Park in Lawrence County.

They drowned while attempting to recover the body of a 23-year-old kayaker, Neil Balcer, from the swift-flowing waters of Slippery Rock Creek.

They were 25 years old. Mr. Wilson was married and had a 6-month-old son; Mr. Murdick and his fiancée had a 1-year-old boy.

"They just seemed to be a pair," said Norma Jean Hoover, Mr. Wilson's grandmother.

"They had a lot of the same interests and they developed an interest in being together."

Their deaths were the first in the line of duty in the 64-year history of the Unionville Volunteer Fire Company. Investigators still are trying to determine precisely what happened.

Mr. Wilson graduated from Butler High in 1996 and then spent two years working at the Butler Ambulance Service. Then for three years, he worked as a 911 operator. In February 1999, he took a job as the director of the ambulance authority in Wetzel County, W.Va. He returned home a few months later when he was offered an opportunity to teach at the Butler County Area Vocation-Technical School.

"He wanted to be youngest to do anything," said his mother, Sandra Wilson.

Mr. Wilson graduated from Indiana University of Pennsylvania's criminal-justice training program. He worked part time as a corrections officer.

Mr. Murdick had started work as a landscaper a few weeks ago, after being laid off by an East Butler manufacturing plant. He also worked as a structural firefighter for the VA Medical Center in Butler.

"He wanted to go into the same field as I went in," said his father, Ron Murdick, a firefighter who also works for the VA.

Mr. Murdick also was taking classes to become a code-enforcement officer.

"They were dedicated and professional family men -- not only to their personal family but to their work family," said Unionville's fire chief, Mark Lauer.

Both men had experience in similar situations, said Mike Pflugh, the assistant fire chief. He said his department has received "a few" emergency phone calls over the years involving the area where they drowned. "For one place, that's a lot."

Mr. Wilson's survivors include his parents, Eugene and Sandra; his wife, Tracy, and son, Cole; a brother, Kirk; and his grandparents, Walter and Norma Jean Hoover.

Mr. Murdick's survivors include his fiancée, Beth McCurdy, and their son, Talan; his parents, Ron and Karen; a brother, Mathew; and his grandparents, Earl and Leah Murdick and Joseph and Virginia Ditullo.

Services will be held at 11 a.m. Friday at the Thompson Miller Funeral Home in Butler. Visitation is scheduled tomorrow from 2 to 4 and 7 to 9 p.m.

Donations may be sent to the Unionville Volunteer Fire Company's Memorial Fund, care of Citizen's National Bank, 196 Clearview Circle, Butler 16001.