

## **Girl killed, 8 hurt as semi hits bus**

### **Wednesday**

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By Star-Banner

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The school bus had stopped on U.S. 301 in Citra to let three or four students step off. Suddenly, Jamar Williams and 20 others from North Marion high and middle schools were knocked around or thrown to the floor.

A semi had struck the bus from behind. The vehicles lurched forward and erupted in flames.

"It just hit. It happened too fast," said Jamar, 14. "It was just so smoky it was hard to see.

"I just remembered from television, stay calm in these situations and don't panic," he said. "That's how people get killed."

Despite the students' courage, and the bravery of bystanders who rushed in to help, the crash claimed one life.

Frances Margay Schee, 13, a North Marion Middle student, died shortly after 4 p.m.

Nine people were taken to area hospitals, including two students with critical injuries.

The driver of the semi, Reinaldo Gonzalez, 30, of Orlando, was taken to Munroe Regional Medical Center with head injuries, according to the Florida Highway Patrol.

This was the first student fatality ever in a school bus accident in Marion County, district officials said.

Superintendent of Schools Jim Yancey urged the parents of the children who survived to hug their children close.

After seeing the crumpled, charred remains of the vehicles, and after talking to the four heroes who braved the flames to get children off the burning bus, he knew one thing.

"This was a tragedy, but it's also a miracle," Yancey said. "We're lucky one person got out of there alive."

Bus No. 9601 carried its usual mix of middle and high school students Tuesday afternoon. It made a routine stop on a clear straight stretch of U.S. 301 at Northeast 155th Street Road.

Then the bus was hit. It was an 18-wheeler carrying fluorescent tubes to a Home Depot. The side of the trailer said "CSX," but it wasn't known what connection, if any, the truck and its driver had with that transportation company.

Jamar saw a cousin, dazed and injured. He helped her up. He and other students moved toward the door. He saw the driver, Anzoria N. Allen-James, struggling with her seat belt. He helped her unfasten the belt. They got off the bus.

A friend of Jamar's was briefly trapped. His foot was caught under a seat. Men who had rushed into the burning vehicle freed him before the fire got worse.

Truck driver James Horton, 43, of Jacksonville, was one of those men. He saw the crash and immediately stopped to help. Horton crossed the highway and

climbed into the bus, pulling out three or four children.

"I'd say they probably got half the kids off the bus themselves," Yancey said. But they couldn't save the last student, Frances, who was trapped in the flames. "They were showing more grief and remorse from not being able to do more," Yancey said.

"No, I'm not a hero," Horton said. "We should all help each other."

Frances went by her middle name, Margay. The Star-Banner featured her family in a story earlier this year. Her father, Jamie, needed a heart transplant.

He never stopped

Horton spoke with Gonzalez, the truck driver, after the crash. Gonzalez told him he never saw the stopped bus, though its flashing lights were on and its stop signs were out.

The semi shoved the bus 275 feet. The charred wreckage shocked Yancey and others who saw it. The last four or five seats on the bus were crumpled and pushed over the rear wheels.

About five minutes after impact, a series of explosions started, Horton said. Lauren Scott was nearby at her mother's farm, 955 E. County Road 316. Scott said she and several visitors heard what she first thought were gunshots. But they were too powerful to be gunshots.

It turned out to be six or eight explosions.

"We were looking at each other like 'What the heck was that?'" she said. "We walked over behind the house and saw this smoke, very black smoke."

Scott drove to the scene.

"The cab of the truck was completely severed," she said. "You could barely see the front end of the bus because of the smoke. ... I did see a group of people on the side of the road. It looked like they were children and young adults."

Sheriff's Lt. Joe Wright, who is also pastor of Willow Plant Missionary Baptist Church in Citra, said five of the injured students are members of his congregation.

Two of them were taken to Shands at the University of Florida. They would have to stay Tuesday night, he said.

Wright said the bus driver was his sister. She was taken to Munroe with head, neck, back and knee injuries, he said.

She was shaken up on Tuesday evening, but he believed she would be OK.

Jim Yancey was sitting in his home office Tuesday evening, studying the agenda for that night's School Board meeting. Then the call came and he raced north to Citra.

"I was doing 70 or 80 (mph)," the school superintendent said. "I know that's not safe, but I couldn't get a police escort to the scene."

Yancey worked the cell phone as he drove. With every update, the news got worse.

The 18-wheeler was on fire. There had been explosions. The truck and the bus were on fire.

He arrived to find parents and bystanders gathered along U.S. 301. One woman couldn't find her daughter.

"I supposed," he would say later, that "that was her (Frances') mother."

Yancey never did make it to the School Board meeting. Chairwoman Judi Zanetti called for a moment of silence before the proceedings began.

One of the bystanders Yancey might have seen was Chad Roberts. It was quite a coincidence. Roberts is an attorney who represents victims of catastrophic transportation accidents. He was driving home to Jacksonville from Tampa when he happened on the crash.

His first questions: How many hours had the truck driver been on the road? What factors - fatigue, a medical condition, intoxication - might have been at play?

Those are the kinds of questions that will take center stage today. Investigators will want to know all about Gonzalez, the 30-year-old Orlando truck driver. A quick check of state records showed no traffic infractions on his record. But what about his occupational safety record? What about his company's performance?

Lawyers weren't the only people thinking what Roberts was thinking Tuesday night.

"To hit a school bus from behind on a very clear day..." he said. "Something's wrong."

*This story includes information from law officers and other emergency responders, as well as interviews with witnesses. Star-Banner reporters Austin Miller, Joe Callahan, Rick Cundiff, Jessica Greene, Jim Ross and Joe Byrnes contributed to this account, which Byrnes compiled.*

