

# Toddler found dead in van was 'sopping wet, blue'

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James Nelson, 2, was found dead in his car seat. / Family photo SHELBY TOWNSHIP, Mich. (Detroit Free Press) -- Johnny Rhoades saw a sight no grandparent should ever see.

Rhoades said he found his grandson, 2-year-old James Nelson, dead inside his daughter's parked minivan Tuesday evening after his daughter's roommate came to his nearby Shelby Township home for help.

"She's pounding on the door. I go down there, and he's dead," Rhoades, 53, said, breaking down into sobs. "He's in the van,

strapped in his frickin' car seat, sopping wet, blue. My girlfriend tried CPR, but he was dead. The poor baby."

James, a smiling toddler in family pictures, died of hyperthermia, or heat stroke, township Police Chief Roland Woelkers said at a news conference Wednesday. An autopsy showed the toddler had been dead for several hours by the time he was found.

Now, a half dozen investigators are working to find out who was the last person to see the boy alive, and who put him in the child seat in the unlocked minivan, windows up, in the sun in the driveway.

James is the second child in metro Detroit this year and at least the 10th in Michigan since 1995 to die of heat stroke from being in a vehicle, said Amber Rollins, director and volunteer manager with KidsAndCars.org. In July, she said, a 5-year-old boy died when he climbed into his grandfather's vehicle in Romulus.

Nearly three dozen children have died nationally this year from being in hot vehicles, officials said, with one dying every nine days since 1998.

"It's a terrible combination, and they just don't stand a chance," Rollins said.

In Shelby Township, police questioned and released the boy's mother, her roommate, grandparents and others. No one is in custody or has been charged in the toddler's death, but Woelkers said everyone is being cooperative.

The boy's exact time of death has not been determined, Woelkers said. An autopsy was done Wednesday by the Macomb County Medical Examiner's Office. Woelkers said James' body temperature at the hospital was 108 degrees. Woelkers said police are trying to determine who had care of James on Tuesday while his mother was at work from early morning; who put him in the child seat in the right rear passenger area of the unlocked 2007 blue Dodge Caravan, and who last saw him alive. The boy was found dead about 6 p.m., Woelkers said, adding that the unnamed roommate and friends pulled him out after the roommate saw him and went elsewhere to have 911 called.

Woelkers said the mother, Audrionna Rhoades, 21, doesn't have an exact daily routine for her only child - sometimes the boy was taken to his grandparents', other times he was left at home with the roommate - while she is at her job in Oakland County. The boy's father is out of state and not involved, Woelkers said.

They all live on Marmoor in the Dequindre Estates mobile home park off Dequindre, south of Hamlin. Johnny Rhoades said he moved 11 lots away from his daughter and grandson in February to help care for the boy.

Johnny Rhoades said his daughter left for work at her job at a Troy medical supplies company about 8:30 a.m. Tuesday. "That girl said my daughter must've put him in the van and left him there all day and she didn't know it," he said. "My daughter wouldn't do that - she'd call me. I gave her two cars, so she always had a car.

Rhoades said the roommate said his daughter "loaded him in the van, then left in the other car, which makes no sense."

No one was at the boy's home Wednesday.

The temperature around the time James was found Tuesday was 72 degrees in Pontiac, with the high for the day at 73 degrees about an hour earlier, said Dan Thompson, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in White Lake Township.

Woelkers said a vehicle's temperature can get to 130 degrees in just 15 minutes.

Rollins said there is no set code for how fast a vehicle heats up or how quickly a child succumbs to heat. She said many factors come into play, such as whether the vehicle is in the sun or the shade, the outside temperature and humidity, whether it's cloudy or sunny, whether the vehicle has tinted or non-tinted windows, and its exterior and interior color.

Then, Rollins said, there are the factors involving the child, whose body temperature rises three to five times faster than an adult's. What is the child wearing, is there a blanket, what is the child's hydration level? Children, she said, also are sandwiched in a child seat by the material on the seat to help keep them safe.

One misconception, she said, is that children won't be harmed if the windows are open slightly. She said that doesn't decrease the maximum temperature that can be reached inside the car. Also, Rollins said, it doesn't have to be super hot outside for a child to die in a hot vehicle. One death the nonprofit recorded was on a day with temperatures in the lower 60s, she said.

"The No. 1 thing is, don't think this cannot happen to you," Rollins said, adding that more than 80% of the cases are parents or caregivers unknowingly leaving a child behind, or a child getting inside a vehicle on his or her own and not being able to get out.

She had two tips to help parents and caregivers remember their little ones in the backseat: Put something you need, like a purse or cell phone, in the backseat, or keep a teddy bear or large stuffed animal in the child seat that is then put in the front seat when the child is placed in the child seat. The stuffed animal is a visual cue that the child is the backseat.

Rhoades' cousin Louis Sardi of Macomb Township said the family is desperate for investigators to determine what happened to James.

"We don't know what happened," Sardi said. "Everybody has so many different stories, so many different things. We just know it's a tragedy. We know we lost baby James - he's dead. Babies are dying every day. It has to stop."

Sardi held out a business card from a Macomb County Children's Protective Services worker who he said was at the home two weeks ago after the toddler was found roaming around the trailer park.

"If they did their job in the first place, this wouldn't have happened," Sardi said, saying the grandfather should have been given custody.

Woelkers said he was unaware of any custody, neglect or abuse investigations involving the boy. He said police had been to the home before, but he did not know when or whether the matter involved the same family or someone who may have lived there before.

Johnny Rhoades said his daughter was questioned by police until early Wednesday, then released. He said she is staying with her mother in Auburn Hills.

"They beat her up till 4 o'clock in the morning," he said.

The family said funeral arrangements, which will be handled by Wujek-Calcaterra & Sons in Sterling Heights, are pending.

<http://www.wzzm13.com/news/article/266892/2/Toddler-found-dead-in-van-was-sopping-wet-blue>