

Lam Newton make his practice debut for Panthers B1

# WINSTON-SALEM JOURNAL

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## Students have a theater summer

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# Police officer killed in crash

The cause of the accident remains undetermined, authorities say

BY JACOB CARAH  
Winston-Salem Journal

Russell Willingham, 28, a Winston-Salem police officer who was killed early Saturday in a car crash while responding to help another officer,

was "excited to serve the citizens of Winston-Salem," said Police Chief Scott Cunningham.

"He was enthusiastic and friendly and looked forward to each shift," Cunningham said. "He loved his wife very much, and was continuing his education."

About 3:15 a.m., Willingham responded to the call of a fellow officer who asked for help in stopping a probable drunken driver who was

weaving on the roads. On the way, Willingham's police car left the road in the 1700 block of North Vargrave Street, went down an embankment and struck a tree.

Willingham was able to call for help after the accident, telling dispatchers that he was pinned in his car.

"Police and other emergency services had some difficulty in locating Officer Willingham at first due to him being completely off the road and not visible

from the roadway," Cunningham said.

The last call from Willingham to dispatchers was to report that his patrol car had caught fire.

When officers and personnel got to the scene, Willingham's vehicle was engulfed in flames, and Willingham was later found dead inside the vehicle.

The department's traffic fatality unit will lead an investigation with the criminal investigation division



Willingham

OFFICER, Page A9

## Officer

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and forensic services division, Cunningham said.

The exact cause of the accident has not been determined.

Cunningham said he believes Willingham was driving a Ford Crown Victoria, as the majority of the department's fleet are that model.

The Ford Crown Victoria has had problems exploding into flames after accidents, especially from rear-end collisions.

Lawsuits over the Crown Victoria have gone both ways, with various police departments and Crown Victoria drivers winning and losing lawsuits against Ford.

Cunningham would not say if the car's make or model had anything to do with the accident and the fire in its aftermath.

"We have just begun the investigation into the situation and will not speculate about or discuss details of the crash until we can speak from a factual basis," Cunningham said. "We will not be making comments about the investigation until we have completed it."

Willingham trained through the Greensboro Police Academy and served the department there from April 2007 through April 2009 before coming to Winston-Salem.

Officer E.M. Mitchum with the Greensboro Po-



LAUREN CARROLL/JOURNAL

**Flags fly at half-staff at the Public Safety Center in honor of Winston-Salem police officer Russell Willingham, who was killed while responding to a call.**

lice Department, who was a cadet at the academy with Willingham, said Willingham always wanted to be a police officer.

"There were other officers who had known him as security at Four Seasons Mall here in Greensboro, and they would put him down about the job, but he wanted to be an officer and to the best of my knowledge, he did well," Mitchum said. "He was one of the good guys, just because he wanted to do the job so badly."

Willingham is the first Winston-Salem police officer to die this year in the line of duty.

Originally from Massa-

chusetts, Willingham is survived by his wife, parents and parents-in-law.

Details regarding funeral arrangements will be released this week, Cunningham said.

On Saturday, flags were lowered to half-staff at the police department in downtown Winston-Salem.

"Officer Willingham was a very good person and dedicated officer," Cunningham said. "He represented the WSPD very well, and we and the community were very fortunate to have him with us."

lcarah@wjournal.com  
(336) 727-7305

By: Wesley Young | Winston-Salem Journal  
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WINSTON-SALEM --

Russell Willingham loved his job as a Winston-Salem police officer.

With notes, flowers and words, he was always telling his wife, Courtney, how much he loved her.

Sometimes he accidentally left his radio microphone on, inadvertently broadcasting his and other officers' conversations. For that, other officers nicknamed him "The Mole."

He showed others an optimistic smile and he even treated people he arrested with respect.

And on Thursday, he was obviously very much missed by the hundreds of police officers and others who filed into Wait Chapel on the campus of Wake Forest University for his funeral. Willingham was later buried in Westminster Gardens in Greensboro.

On July 30, Willingham, 28, was responding to a call in the early morning hours to help another officer when his police cruiser ran off the road on North Vargrave Street, went down an embankment and struck a tree.

Willingham was pinned in. In his last call to dispatchers he said his car had caught fire. When help arrived, Willingham's car was engulfed in flames. He was later found dead inside his car.

Hundreds of police officers from all over the state, from the coast to the mountains, flanked the walkway leading to Wait Chapel on Thursday, and stood frozen in salute as the horse-drawn caisson carrying Willingham's flag-draped casket made its way across the quad. They wore their dress uniforms in the hot summer sun and the sky reflected off their shiny shoes.

During the service, police chaplain Ron Baity called Willingham a hero because he was one who "volunteered to stand on the front line" in his community.

"He and his squad were protecting the citizens of the city, not knowing, at the beginning of his shift, that he would make the ultimate sacrifice," Baity said.

Willingham and his wife had a routine, Baity said. Every morning he told her she was beautiful. They would throw each other a kiss as he went off to work.

Baity had people laughing about some of Willingham's quirks. For example, he once showed up for a construction project wearing flip-flops and carrying no tools – convincing a friend that he had no talent in that direction. Another time, fellow officers fooled him into thinking that he was required to draw a sketch of a deer's antlers after the deer collided with a car.

Baity and other speakers talked about Willingham's faith, and about the need to keep faith in the face of a life cut short so soon.

"We have been here before," Baity said, speaking of other gatherings, other funerals. "We have been here too often. But we have never been here without divine help."

Winston-Salem Police Chief Cunningham said after the service that the force and the city "have lost a real good man ... the kind of officer and man that we need."

Police funerals never get any easier to attend, he said.

"They stack up and take a tremendous toll," Cunningham said. "A lot of things that you do over and over again get easier over time, but this is not one of them."

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## Obituary

# Russell Mark Willingham Jr.



WILLINGHAM WINSTON-SALEM - Russell Mark Willingham, Jr. Dec. 10, 1982 - July 30, 2011 Officer Russell Mark Willingham, Jr., passed away Saturday July 30, 2011, responding to a call while on duty as a Winston-Salem [police officer](#). Russell was born December 10, 1982 in Framingham, Massachusetts, to Russell and Karen Willingham, Sr. He was a graduate of Milford High School, received his Bachelor's degree from the University of Massachusetts at Lowell. Russell also earned his Master of Science in Criminal Justice from Kaplan University, and was pursuing his Doctorate in Criminal Justice from Capella University. Russ was also currently an

Adjunct Professor at Strayer University in Greensboro. Russ was a member of Alpha Phi Sigma, the National Criminal Justice Honor Society. Russ's work ethic set precedence in everything that he did. He was a devoted officer, friend, brother, son, and most of all, husband. His love of law enforcement was undeniable and he would do anything for his Brothers in Blue. He was a Master Mason at lodge 76 in Greensboro. His love of learning and education was paramount in his involvement with the Masonic Children's Home. Russ will be admirably remembered for his smile, his infectious laugh, and the honor and respect that he bestowed on everyone that he met. Russ loved and lived life to the fullest and this was personified in the love that he shared with his wife Courtney. Surviving Russ, are his wife, Courtney Gordon Willingham, of Winston-Salem; his parents Russell and Karen Willingham, Sr. of Greensboro; brothers, Kyle and Joshua Willingham and sister Caroline Willingham, all of Greensboro; father and mother-in-law, Russell and Julia Gordon of Greensboro; sister-in-law, Korie Gordon Lovette (Darren) of Greensboro; nephew, Brock Lovette, and niece, Katherine Lovette, of Greensboro. Russ is also survived by his maternal grandparents, Ralph and Eleanor Porzio of Milford, MA and paternal grandmother, Maude Willingham of Jacksonville, FL. He was also survived by a host of cousins, friends, and the Brethren in Law Enforcement. He will be sorely missed by all whose lives that he touched. Visitation will be held Wednesday evening, August 3, at Wait Chapel at Wake Forest University beginning at 4:00 p.m., and family will be present from 6:00 to 8 :00 p.m. Funeral Services will be held Thursday, August 4, at 10 a.m. at Wait Chapel. Interment will follow at Westminster Gardens in Greensboro. In lieu of flowers, memorial contributions can be made to The Police Benevolence Society, The Masonic Children's Home of Oxford, NC, or The Russell Willingham Scholarship Fund.