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Ironman honors fallen fireman

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Streaks of pink pierced the gray clouds as dawn gave birth to a sun-splashed morning at South Shore Harbor Marina. A mass of bodies coalesced in a sea of black wetsuits. From a few hundred yards away, they looked like seals waiting anxiously on the beach.

Up close, they were suntanned and fit - a gang of people with rock-hard calves and ripped abs and five-digit numbers in black on their arms.

About 2,000 men and women from 46 states and 23 countries took part in the 70.3-mile Ochsner Ironman race Sunday. But it was a 36-year-old firefighter from Atlanta who didn't swim a stroke, ride a mile or run a single step who was the spiritual leader of the pack.

"Father, we come to you today with a heavy heart after losing our fellow athlete," said Barry Edwards, of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, in a prayer before the race.

He was talking about Sgt. Frank Guinn, who was struck by a car and killed two days earlier while riding his bike in New Orleans East with his brother-in-law, Andrew Powell.

In the aftermath of his death, two tight-knit communities - firefighters and triathletes - joined together to offer an outpouring of emotional and financial support to his widow, Kimberly, and the couple's 7-year-old identical triplets: Isabelle, Alyssa and Makenna.

According to police, Guinn and Powell were rear-ended by a White Chevy Cruze at about 10:15 a.m. Friday in the 20000 block of Chef Menteur Highway.

Guinn died instantly; Powell was taken to a hospital in serious condition. Police have interviewed the driver of the vehicle but have not arrested him.

Guinn had been preparing for the race, which would have been a homecoming for the Louisiana native.

"We sat for two hours in the fire engine the other day just talking about the event," said Lt. Brian Garner, a

fellow Atlanta firefighter and close friend. "He had the maps and was so excited."

Garner said Guinn, a nine-year veteran of the Atlanta Fire Department, was a family man with an infectious spirit who was well-loved by everyone.

"He always had a smile and was never negative," he said. "He loved his family, and that love spilled over to the firefighters."

Guinn hailed from Haynesville, a small Claiborne Parish town in north Louisiana close to the Arkansas border.

It was there he first met his future wife, Kimberly. She later moved to Monroe, but the two reunited while attending Northwestern State University in Natchitoches.

They were married in 1997 and eventually moved to Atlanta, where she worked as a teacher and he took a job as an EMT and a firefighter.

It was Kimberly who first started running half-marathons, providing the spark that ignited Frank's passion for racing.

"With a few months, Frank surpassed me," she said.

The 295-pound former football player soon learned to swim and bought a bike. Exercise became his respite from the stress of his vocation.

"The road was where he found his peace," Kimberly said. "It calmed his mind."

A final ride remembered

Bill Burke, founder and director of the Ochsner Ironman Race, said it's not unusual for triathletes to scout out the course before a competition.

"Triathletes are creatures of habit," he said. "They want to see where the buoys are in the water and where the water stations are during the run. But what they want to see the most is the bike course. They want to see how many hills there are and what the wind is like."

Burke said the 56-mile bike portion of the race weaved along Chef Menteur Highway and throughout New Orleans East. Guinn, he said, was tuning up when he was killed.

Despite the risks involved in the sport, Burke said, he has heard of only one other occasion in which a triathlete has died during training, in California a few years ago.

"When I got the call, it was just shocking," he said, choking back tears as he spoke minutes before the start of the race.

Burke urged fellow triathletes to make donations to the Guinn family. As of Saturday afternoon, a fund started by a family friend had already received \$25,000.

"I know we can get that number into the stratosphere," Burke said.

Kimberly Guinn said she was stunned by the generosity she had already received from fellow athletes. She thanked them for their support before the race Sunday.

"Being here makes me feel close to Frank," she said. "I thought it would be hard, but I feel at peace around the athletes."

April Grow, a friend of the family, said Kimberly Guinn would often worry about the danger her husband faced on the job, but never thought it would be his passion for racing that would take his life.

According to the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Frank Guinn was part of a Fire Department special operations team "that handled building collapses, high angle rescues, confined space rescues and trench collapses."

"Kim was prepared to lose Frank in the line of duty, and she often worried when he was at a dangerous fire that he wouldn't come back," Grow said. "She wasn't prepared to lose him like this."

'Greatest fraternity on Earth'

When fellow firefighter Garner heard about Frank Guinn's death, he cleared his schedule and set off for New Orleans to begin the process of memorializing his fallen friend.

It was an endeavor that he said was made far easier by the support of the New Orleans Fire Department.

"New Orleans has rolled out the red carpet for me," Garner said of the assistance provided by Superintendent Tim McConnell and his staff.

Garner said the Atlanta Fire Department was reeling from the loss not only of Guinn but also of another firefighter who died the next day from a brain aneurysm.

He said Guinn's body will be transported back to Atlanta, where he will receive a firefighter's funeral that is expected to draw thousands of mourners. The body then will be sent to Haynesville for burial.

Garner said the New Orleans Fire Department has provided him and Kimberly Guinn with a vehicle as well as other logistical assistance.

On Sunday, a handful of firefighters, including McConnell, showed up at the race's starting line to show their solidarity.

"I always talk about it being the greatest fraternity on earth," McConnell said of the firefighting profession.

Kimberly Guinn said she also felt solace in speaking with other first responders about Frank Guinn's accident.

On Sunday, she hugged firefighters before she addressed the crowd.

"I know Frank is racing somewhere and watching you guys," she told the race participants.

Minutes later, as the national anthem was being sung, tears flowed freely down the faces of many of the elite athletes, who were seconds away from beginning the course.

Kimberly Guinn then sounded the starting horn.

For the next two hours, triathletes plunged into Lake Pontchartrain six abreast. Well-wishers dashed down the sandy bank to cheer on their friends and loved ones.

Kimberly Guinn was given the finisher's medal and cap her husband would have earned for completing the triathlon - tangible relics of Frank Guinn's last race, the one he never got to run.

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GRAPHIC: Color photos: Participants Dana Gilchrist, left, of California and donna Zimmerman, of New Jersey, prepare Sunday for the Ochsner Ironman 70.3 New Orleans triathlon. Participant Carl Blunck says the Pledge of Allegiance before the Ochsner Ironman 70.3 New Orleans triathlon begins Saturday (Advocate photos by Veronica Dominach)

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