

# Death touches many people beyond victims

By Loretta Green

Times Tribune staff

Death is like the stone in the pond. It makes its shocking impact but its ripples reach out to touch those beyond its victims.

When Jerry Abney lost his balance Jan. 17 on the steep side of the California Aqueduct and his brother-in-law, Lee Romes, jumped in to save him, and both disappeared in the swift current, the tragedy stretched beyond them.

Abney, 28, left his grieving wife, Debra, to care for five little boys, the oldest of whom is 6.

Romes, 30, left two young children who live in San Jose with their mother.

Both men left the memory of their death struggle painfully embedded in the memory of their neighbor and fishing companion, 24-year-old Kevin Wheeler, who had tried to save them.

Left, too, was Lee's mother, Dorothy Romes (also Jerry's mother-in-law), who waits each day for word of the bodies still unrecovered from the deep canal.

"Oh my God, it's so hard losing my child. It's so hard," Dorothy Romes said, her voice tiny and squeezed as she fought back tears.

East Palo Alto residents have come to know Dorothy Romes as a community helper. When someone is in need, she pitches in.

She organized the Teen Council in East Palo Alto and encouraged youngsters to do volunteer work. She is on the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the national nominating committee for the Western Association of Neighborhood Health Centers, the advisory board of Canada College and organized voter registration for EPACCI, a citizens group to incorporate East Palo Alto.

Now she finds herself in the unusual position of needing help and moral support from friends and community.

"I've really lost two sons," she said. "He (Abney) and Debra were one. He would never stay out even two hours without calling her."

The petite woman recalled the men talking excitedly about having a fish fry and how Lee Romes had swooped her up in his arms just the night before and said, "I love you mama. You're a dynamite little mama."

The young men had no insurance and she is quick to say that she is poor.

"If we don't have anything but a pot of beans, I am glad to share it," said Romes, but she said frankly that she had little to give to the seven children who have lost their fathers.

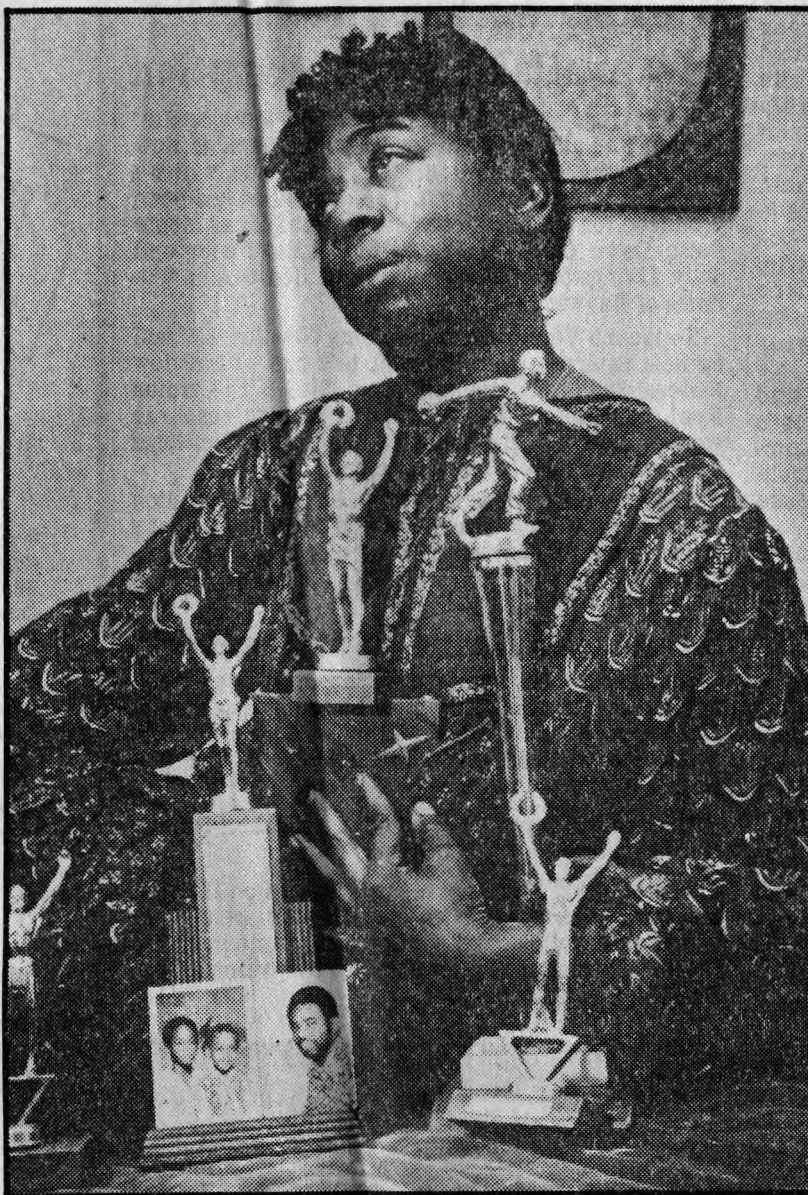
(East Palo Alto Mayor Barbara Mouton says a fund is being established for the family and children. Contributions may be sent to: Romes/Abney Fund, West Coast Federal Savings and Loan, 2200 University Ave., East Palo Alto, 94303.)

Monday the handsome little Abney boys were romping, playing and laughing. They were a stark contrast to the hushed atmosphere and heartache that had settled over the house. Sympathy cards covered a credenza and throughout the week neighbors and friends had come in to hug Dorothy Romes in tearful embraces.

Debra Abney, wife of Jerry, has tried to carry on, insisting on dressing the boys neatly each day and making up their beds herself despite offers of family members to relieve her. She said that after law enforcement agents came to inform the family of the apparent drownings, 6-year-old Troynigel told her he wanted to pray for his father.

"Later he said, 'Mama what are you going to do with daddy's clothes?'"

"Before I could answer he said, 'I want to grow up and be big and



Dorothy Romes of East Palo Alto is proud of the "Boy of the Year" trophy presented to her late son, Lee, by the Herbert Hoover Boys' Club. She carries pictures of Lee and his two children in her wallet.

strong like my daddy so I can wear them."

Debra Abney is determined to be strong too.

"I'm just going to try to do what he wanted me to do for his kids," she said.

She leaned dejectedly on the dresser. Then her face suddenly lit up with a smile and she began to talk about a husband who would push the furniture back and play football with his five little boys.

"I'd be the referee and we'd have time-outs for juice or water," she recalled. "And he was always thinking of little games to help them learn," she said, describing

small children, he is now jobless because he was late for work the day after the tragedy and was fired.

Wheeler said he and Romes were 150 feet from where Abney was practicing casting with the brand new rod he had purchased for that day, his first ever fishing.

He lost his footing and Romes and Wheeler ran to his aid. Romes was a swimmer, but Abney was not. Romes tried to save him and the men began to struggle in the swift current.

"I grabbed Lee's hand and tried to hold onto to him but we lost our grip," said Wheeler. "I kept throw-

ing them the fishing line but every time they grabbed it the line broke."



Kevin Wheeler, 24, can't get the drowning of his two friends, Lee Romes and Jerry Abney, out of his mind. He tried to save them as they struggled in the swift current of the California Aqueduct south of Tracy.

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Now Wheeler says he is tormented with the question of whether he should have jumped in, too.

"I believe I did the best I could," he said. He shuddered, exhaled slowly and shook his head as if to shake out the horror.

"But in between time, I just keep picturing it over and over."

He summed it up perhaps for all of those the tragedy has touched.

"The only thing I've wanted to see is Lee and Jerry standing there again."

Divorced and rearing three

Times Tribune photo by Art Ray

Times Tribune staff photo by Bob Andres