

“Rules and regulations, they don’t mean anything when it comes to children’s lives.”

— Robin Prosser, Charlois Road resident

Neighbors want clay pit fenced

Girls’ deaths amplify safety concerns

By John W. Allman and Elizabeth Lee
News Journal staff writers

Santa Rosa County officials were asked last year to do something about a 20-year-old, privately owned clay pit in East Milton by residents who complained that it was unsafe because it was not fenced.

EAST MILTON

Officials, instead, fell back on a county ordinance that requires only new pits to be fenced.

Residents now are mounting a petition drive to finally force some action after three girls died Sunday after being trapped underneath about three feet of clay when an embankment at the pit caved in.

The community wants the county to either shut down the pit or make its owner, Jerry Jernigan, install a fence to keep other neighborhood children from being injured or killed.

The county may still do nothing. Hunter Walker, Santa Rosa county administrator, said Monday that he is not recommending any action because the accident happened on private property.

“It’s not just here. It involves everybody,” said Winona Powers, one of several residents who watched helplessly Sunday as the bodies of the three little girls were pulled from beneath about a ton of dirt near the bottom of the pit on Charlois Road off State Road 87.

Powers said there are clay pits across East Milton that do not have fencing or other safety precautions to keep children out.

Another resident, Robin See **COUNTY, 4A**



Photo courtesy of Kitty Hopkins

The collapse of a clay pit ledge Sunday afternoon trapped Mitchell Bass, 11, from left; Jessica Bush, 10; Jillian Bush, 10; and Mallory Bush, 11. Only Mitchell survived.



Scott Fisher/News Journal

Three crosses have been erected in memory of Mallory, Jessica and Jillian Bush near the clay pit in East Milton where they died.

11-year-old boy deals with pain of survival

By John W. Allman
News Journal staff writer

Mitchell Bass knows he is not to blame, but that has not kept guilt from entering his mind.

“I thought it was my fault,” he said Monday. “I felt guilty like I had killed them.”

Mitchell knows that he was only trying to keep three little girls from being harmed in a lightning storm. He also knows that if he had not stepped from beneath a clay embankment where the girls were huddled,

he too would have been buried alive when the embankment gave way.

“I was just trying to get the girls to safety,” he said. “If I had known that would happen ...”

The girls — Mallory Bush, 11, and twins Jessica and Jillian Bush, 10 — died Sunday after being trapped beneath more than a ton of dirt for about 45 minutes.

Mitchell, 11, came home Monday from Santa Rosa Medical Center with few visible

scars of his ordeal a day before when he was caught in dirt up to his chest and forced to watch as people frantically dug for the other children buried several feet below him.

Lost sisters

Mitchell spoke to reporters while surrounded by family members who could not keep from touching his arms, almost as if they wanted to reassure themselves that he was there.

Mitchell lives with his moth-

er, Cheryl, and her boyfriend, Danny Bush, on Scenic View Way in a rural community in East Milton off State Road 87. Every other weekend, Bush’s three daughters from a previous marriage came to visit from their home in Pace.

Mitchell, who turns 12 next month, was not related by blood to Mallory, Jillian or Jessica, but he considered them sisters. That’s why, he said, he wanted to show them the place

See **SURVIVING BOY, 4A**

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he liked to play.

The four children went to a clay pit about 3 p.m. Sunday on Charlois Road and were playing there when a storm began.

"Lightning was popping all around us," he said. Mitchell said they gathered beneath an overhang as the pit floor filled with water. He heard a car approaching and stepped out to see if it was his mother. Seconds later, the overhang collapsed.

"The first thing that ran through my mind was, 'I'm alive,' " he said.

Then he realized he was covered to his chest in sand and dirt. He tried to pull himself out for about 10 minutes before he heard a honking horn. He yelled out and his mother's boyfriend appeared in front of him and began digging with his hands.

"I said, 'No, you see me. I'm alive. Get the girls. They might be dead,' " Mitchell remembered.

Mitchell said he could feel Jillian's hand on his leg, deep in the dirt.

"I tapped her every now and then to see if she was alive," he said.

He watched as more people arrived. Emergency crews worked to get the children out, first using shovels and then their hands.

"You could only dig so long with the shovel because you couldn't tell which way their legs were going," said Jeff Land, chief of East Milton Volunteer Fire and Rescue. "I didn't want to take the chance of cutting one of them."

By the time they got the girls out, they were gone.

Letting go

For family members, the memories

brought tears Monday, even as they tried to rejoice at Mitchell's return home.

Kitty Hopkins, Mitchell's grandmother, showed pictures of the four children opening presents at her home last Christmas morning. She talked about how Jillian had just gotten her nails done before the children went out to play. She remembered how one of those nails was missing when she saw Jillian's body at the hospital.

Hopkins said she is worried about Danny Bush, whom she says still has not accepted the accident. She is worried about her daughter, Cheryl, and she is worried about Donna Bush, the mother of the three girls.

Friends of Donna Bush said Monday she still is not able to talk about her loss.

For Mitchell, it will continue to sink in.

He said he spent Sunday night in the hospital convinced that the girls were still alive. He remembered a story he had heard about a man who came back to life 24 hours after being struck by lightning. Mitchell said he kept asking the nurse to check on the girls because he could see them waking up, spitting out dirt and being confused about where they were.

"Do you still think the girls are alive?" his cousin, Ashley Hopkins, 10, asked when Mitchell finished his story.

Mitchell shook his head. "No."

Mitchell said he wants to make sure that other children stay away from the clay pit on Charlois Road.

"I think they should have that thing fenced up like a jail," he said. "I've already promised my cousins and my family I would never mention the name or play down there again."