

ARCHIVE

Pasco boy, 4, dies after furniture crushes him



By John Hill

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A 4-year-old boy, possibly eager to play a videotape, tried to climb his family's new entertainment center Wednesday.

Instead, young Brett Puniska pulled the 400-pound, 6- by 4-foot unit on top of himself, sheriff's officials said. Despite attempts to revive him, he was pronounced dead at 6 p.m.

The furniture still had casters that workers were to remove today. The unit was delivered Saturday, "but there was a problem with it and the family had not permanently placed it, pending repairs," sheriff's spokesman Jon Powers said.

Officials would not speculate whether the absence of wheels would have prevented the accident.

The tragedy happened about 4:45 p.m. as the boy was alone in the living room of his family's home at 7705 Bass Lane, sheriff's officials said.

Brett's 12-year-old sister, Jessica, was in the dining room talking on the phone. She heard the crash and screamed for the pair's mother, Marilyn Sue Puniska, 39.

Mrs. Puniska, who records show has been a licensed practical nurse, rushed from the bathroom and attempted CPR. Jessica called 911.

At 5:15 p.m., rescue workers took Brett from the peach single-story house and drove him to a golf driving range across the street. Twelve minutes later, a helicopter landed to take Brett to Bayfront Medical Center in St. Petersburg. It took off at 5:38 p.m.

Brett was pronounced dead at 6 p.m.

Tampa Bay Times

Pasco sheriff's Sgt. Charlie Calhoun surmised that Brett climbed the furniture while attempting to watch a videotape. The unit held a 31-inch television, VCR, videotapes and a stereo system.

"The boy went to put the video into the VCR," Calhoun said. "He went to reach a tape."

Neighbors said the Puniskas had moved into the corner house just weeks ago. Marilyn and her husband, Gabriel J. Puniska Jr., 49, were married in a civil ceremony in Pasco on Valentine's Day 1991, records show.

"I hadn't ever met them," said Karen Kuebler, 36, who lives next door. "They never came over. They never asked for anything."

David Jesse, 34, rushed two doors down to the Puniskas' home after Jessica called for help. But neither he nor his wife, Jacinda, 29, knew much about Brett Puniska.

"He (Brett) was so young. I guess that's why we never saw him," Mrs. Jesse said. "All the other kids around here are older, 10 or 12."

Mrs. Puniska was distraught while awaiting the medical helicopter. She asked authorities to remove news reporters from the scene, and at one photographer she screamed: "My son's inside half-dead, and you're taking my picture!"

Sheriff's officials said Brett suffered head injuries, though the exact cause of death will be determined by the medical examiner's office. Officials characterized the event as an accident, though the investigation is continuing.

"At this point there is nothing to indicate the tragic incident was anything but accidental," said sheriff's spokesman Powers.

A similar furniture accident happened in March. An 18-month-old Land O'Lakes boy was killed when a dresser fell on top of him, trapping him and cutting off his oxygen.

_ Staff writer T. Christian Miller contributed to this report.

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