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Former Tecumseh superintendent killed in off-road rollover

A former Tecumseh Public Schools superintendent was killed Monday in an off-road crash in Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

The Houghton County sheriff's department said Gene Cooley of Mackinaw City was out in the woods preparing for deer hunting season when he lost control of an off-road vehicle on a snow-covered trail in Duncan Township at about 9:30 a.m. Monday and it rolled onto him. The sheriff's department said Cooley was pronounced dead at the scene.

Cooley was superintendent of the Tecumseh Public Schools from 1984 to 1992. The crash happened before a major snowstorm moved into the area.

A native of Charlotte, Cooley was hired as Tecumseh's assistant superintendent in 1971 and moved up to superintendent when Robert Duhan retired in 1984. He stayed in Tecumseh until 1992 when he retired and moved to Mackinaw City to operate the Tee Pee Campground.

Cooley played baseball at Western Michigan University and had been signed by the Pittsburgh Pirates. He played in their farm system in 1962 and 1963. Before coming to Tecumseh, Cooley was a teacher, coach, principal and superintendent of the Hanover-Horton School District.

During his time in Tecumseh, Cooley made many friends. Former co-workers praised him. Carol Nelson-Purkey, retired assistant superintendent of the Caledonia Community Schools and a former TPS teacher, community education director and assistant Tecumseh High School principal, said Cooley was an outstanding superintendent.

"But, more than that, he was a family man, a loyal friend, a mentor to many, very involved in the community, had a great sense of humor, and loved life," she wrote in an email. "It has been very difficult for many of us who knew and loved Gene to accept the reality of his passing."

Stanley Legenc, a member of the Tecumseh District Library board and a retired Tecumseh teacher, said he will remember Cooley as a man who did his best in everything he did.

"No matter if it was for the school district, the city or his service club," Legenc said. "Gene did a lot for the United Methodist Church, of which he was a member."

Teri Hoeft, executive assistant to current Tecumseh Superintendent Kelly Coffin, said she will remember Cooley's happy, friendly nature.

"He was always whistling," she said.

According to an article in the Cheboygan News, Cooley, with his wife, Jo, was an active member of the Mackinaw City Chamber of Commerce, serving as an ambassador and heading many projects for the chamber. Dawn Edwards, executive director of the Chamber, said Cooley's passing leaves a hole that will be hard to fill.

"Gene was a man of action, with a true heart for Mackinaw City," Edwards told the newspaper. "He was like the Energizer Bunny and loved sharing his life with Mackinaw City."



PHOTO/ PHOTO COURTESY OF CHEBOYGAN DAILY TRIBUNE

Former Tecumseh school superintendent Gene Cooley died Monday in a off-road rollover crash.

A memorial service is scheduled for 11 a.m. Nov. 22 at the Church of the Straits in Mackinaw City.

Additionally, a local observance is planned: At 7 p.m. Nov. 24, the family will host a gathering in honor of Cooley at the Tecumseh High School cafetorium.

The board of education meeting scheduled for that evening has been rescheduled for 7 p.m. Nov. 25.

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