

SP Mother Kills Self, Son By Setting Fire

By PAUL J. PEYTON

Specialty Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

SCOTCH PLAINS – A 32-year-old Scotch Plains woman was killed along with her 3-year-old son in a December 18 fire, which authorities said she set in their Church Street apartment. A neighbor reported the fire around 7 p.m.

During a December 19 press conference at the Scotch Plains Police Department, Union County Prosecutor Theodore Romankow said firefighters forced their way into the two-family home and proceeded to a second-floor bedroom, the door of which was closed. After pushing in the door, they discovered the bodies of Katherine Halverson and her son, Jeremy Scott McDonald, Jr., lying on the floor next to each other.

Scotch Plains Police Chief Brian Mahoney said members of the rescue squad attempted CPR on both victims at the scene, as well as en route to Overlook Medical Center in Summit. Both were pronounced dead at the hospital.

Upon further investigation by the township's police department and the Union County Homicide Task Force, Mr. Romankow said it was determined that Ms. Halverson used an accelerant on rags to set the fire.

"The mother spread this accelerant on these rags on the floor, lit it and it smoked the room. Obviously, she died of smoke poisoning. She wasn't badly burned," Mr. Romankow said. He said her son also succumbed to smoke inhalation.

The prosecutor said it took the county's medical examiner eight hours to perform the autopsies on the victims. A family dog also perished, although a cat was found unharmed

outside the residence.

Mr. Romankow said it was "very fortunate" that no one else was injured as there was another family residing in an attached home at the same Church Street location.

Chief Mahoney classified the case as an "arson, murder-suicide." He said the rags with accelerant were found inside the bedroom door. "The fire was quickly extinguished," he said, noting the blaze was put out within 20 to 30 minutes of the arrival of firefighters. He credited the quick response of the fire department, which is located a few blocks away, in preventing the fire from spreading.

The boy's father, Jeremy Scott McDonald, did not live with Ms. Halverson, although her mother did. The mother was not home when the fire occurred. Mr. Romankow said Ms. Halverson and Mr. McDonald had been involved in child-custody hearings over their son.

"Obviously, she was depressed over court proceedings," Mr. Romankow told *The Westfield Leader/Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times*.

According to Jeremy's McDonald, Jr.'s 2009 birth announcement published in *The Leader/Times*, the couple had lived in Elizabeth. A neighbor interviewed by News12 said Ms. Halverson had resided on Church Street since April. She is from Scotch Plains, having graduated from Scotch Plains-Fanwood High School in 1998, where she was the only girl on the football team.

Ms. Halverson also had been an intern for *The Leader/Times*, where she archived stories regarding the John List murders.



Greg Ryan for The Westfield Leader and The Times

REMEMBERING VICTIMS...Thirty to 40 people gathered Friday morning at Mindowaskin Park in Westfield to remember the victims of Newtown/Sandy Hook, Conn. They were remembered with song poems and Ted Schlosberg playing Taps. The memorial was in coordination with churches ringing their bells across the country at 9:30 a.m., one week after the mass killing. The names and ages of those killed were read. The vigil was organized by residents Karen Egert and Lisa Alongi. Westfield parents came to show their support and talk about the need to make changes, legislatively and socially, in order to reduce gun violence. Thoughts and ideas were exchanged on ways to ban high powered assault weapons, magazine clips, etc. Anyone would like to get involved in future can e-mail Karen Egert at karenegert22@aol.com.



Peyton's Peek at the Week In Politics

By Paul Peyton of The Leader/Times

Sweeney Won't Support Gay Marriage Referendum

Senate President Steven Sweeney (D-3, Gloucester) has said he does not support a measure by Assemblyman Reed Gusciora (D-15, Trenton), the state's first openly gay legislator, that would give voters the chance to decide whether gay people should have the right to marry, the *Star-Ledger* has reported.

"I have firmly stated before and will say again now that I do not believe you put civil rights on the ballot, period," Sen. Sweeney told the paper.

Assemblyman Gusciora said, "I am the last person who believes civil rights should be on the ballot, but civil rights delayed is civil rights denied."

Republican State Senator Christopher "Kip" Bateman of Somerset County, the prime sponsor of referendum, SCR- 88, seeking voter approval to amend the state constitution to legalize same sex marriage in New Jersey, said he welcomed Asm. Gusciora's support of putting the question before voters.

"I'm glad that he now understands what I was saying in February: that this is the most pragmatic course of action. A straight up or down vote on legalizing same sex marriage in the Constitution, not a 'defense of marriage' law, gives finality to a matter that, if handled by simple legislation, could be repealed in the future or mired in litigation for years," Sen. Bateman said.

Broker Gets 15 Years for Stealing Money From BOE, City

A Maryland insurance broker has been sentenced to state prison for stealing nearly \$2.6 million from the Perth Amboy Board of Education by submitting fraudulent bills, and also stealing \$216,495 from the City of Perth Amboy by collecting payments for a non-existent "wellness program" for city employees, according to Attorney General Jeffrey Chiesa.

Francis X. Gartland, 71, of Baltimore, Md., was sentenced to 15 years in state prison, including seven and half years of parole ineligibility and a concurrent seven-year sentence on a theft by deception charge. Gartland pleaded guilty on April 10 to first-degree money laundering against the school district and second-degree theft by deception against the city.

Christie Replaces Morris Pros. With Acting Prosecutor

Morris County Prosecutor Robert Bianchi, a holdover since his term expired in June, was replaced on December 14 by attorney Frederic M. Knapp as acting county prosecutor by order of Governor Chris Christie, the *Daily Record* reported.

Mr. Knapp, a Republican, was nominated by Gov. Christie on June 7 to succeed Mr. Bianchi, a Democrat.

"I don't think there's any debate about the governor's ability to do it (remove Bianchi for Knapp)," Gov. Christie told *The Daily Record*. "We did it. But we waited for seven months for a hearing. The Senate cannot continue to be able, especially in sensitive law enforcement positions, to just sit in the corner and hold their breath because they lost the election in 2009. The Governor said the attorney general has also named acting prosecutors in Essex and Atlantic Counties." Senate Democrats last Thursday denied Mr. Knapp's nomination.

Senate Republican Leader Tom Kean, Jr. (R-21, Westfield) said of Thursday's action: "[The] rejection of Frederic Knapp's nomination, through a suspension of Senate rules and without so much as a Judiciary Committee hearing, can only be described as a temper tantrum. In so doing, the Democrats have denied the people of Morris County, for no good reason whatsoever, the opportunity to be served by a talented attorney, diligent public servant, and good man."

Judge Rejects Latest CF Motion In Birchwood Case

By DELL SIMEONE

Specialty Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

CRANFORD – Birchwood or the 360-apartment development to be built by the Cranford Development Associates (CDA) at 315 Birchwood Avenue in Cranford, which is in a flood plain, has caused Cranford Township a lot of headaches. Last year the township was victim to massive flooding. This is a factor in the township's opposition to the development.

CDA brought a builder's remedy lawsuit against the township, and won, in order to go forward with the apartments, which would contain 60 affordable units. Cranford had not complied with the New Jersey Mt. Laurel Agreement to provide the required amount of affordable housing in town.

Last year, the township was ordered by state Superior Court Judge Lisa Chrystal to change its zoning laws to prepare for the Birchwood development. Judge Chrystal also ordered the Birchwood site plan hearing to take place, in August, in Superior Court in Elizabeth and not by the Cranford Planning Board in the Cranford Municipal Building. The township objected to that order. Letters were sent to the judge requesting a change of venue. The requests were denied. Judge Chrystal appointed retired Judge Douglas Wolfson as the special hearing officer to preside, and appointed Elizabeth McKenzie as the special master for the hearing.

Judge Wolfson and Ms. McKenzie submitted their findings to Judge Chrystal this fall. Both findings were favorable to CDA. In October, Stephen Eisendorfer, of Hill Wallack, of Princeton, representing the CDA, requested that Judge Chrystal make a final judgement in the case. That has not happened.

At the December 17 hearing on a motion from Cranford, Judge Chrystal said that she had not received any objections from Cranford residents to Judge Wolfson's recommendations on Birchwood. Cranford then asked for, and was granted, an extension until December 31. Objections can be sent to Honorable Lisa F. Chrystal, J.S.C., Union County Courthouse, 2 Broad St., Tower Bldg., 11th floor, Elizabeth, N.J. 07207.

At the hearing, Cranford Township Attorney Philip Morin argued to have Ms. McKenzie disqualified from the case based on a statement she made in an e-mail (in a different case), calling herself an advocate of affordable housing. Cranford asked the trial court to disqualify Ms. McKenzie as special master in the site plan hearing, and that a new hearing be ordered. The request was denied by Judge Chrystal.

"It is a disappointment, but not a surprise," said Mr. Morin of the ruling.

He said Judge Chrystal said that the motion filed by the township did not meet the necessary criteria to

vacate her previous order. She scheduled a court hearing on the Birchwood site plan on Monday, February 4, at 10 a.m. in Superior Court in Elizabeth. At that time, the township's objections to the special hearing officer's recommendations will be heard and she will make the final order in the case.

Until new appointments are made by the township committee in January, it is uncertain whether Mr. Morin will continue as the township attorney. He stated that should an appeal, by Cranford, go forward on the Birchwood case, the question of Ms. McKenzie's possible bias would not be able to be brought up unless it had been addressed by the court at this time.

He said further, at this point, CDA has still not received a permit from the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) to raise part of Birchwood Avenue a foot above the flood plain and provide an emergency exit from the development. If the CDA does not obtain the permit, it would be a large obstacle to the development.

Two Kids Hit By Car On Way to School

WESTFIELD – Two children on their way to Edison Intermediate School (EIS) last Thursday were struck by a car at the intersection of Rahway Avenue and Grove Street.

In an e-mail to parents, EIS Principal Matt Bolton said both students were transported to the hospital for observation. He said the motorist who hit them was blinded by the sun and did not see the crossing guard. One student returned to school Thursday while the other was expected to return last Friday.

Bramnick Calls for Schroeder to Resign

"In light of today's indictment [Friday by the state Attorney General] of Assemblyman [Robert] Schroeder [R-39th], I do not believe he can continue to properly serve his constituents while facing these serious charges. I believe it is in the best interest of his constituents that Assemblyman Schroeder immediately resign his seat in the General Assembly."

Assembly Republican Leader Jon Bramnick Westfield

Correction

In the article entitled "Westfield Settles Lawsuit; 24 Units Planned for Springfield Ave." in the December 20 edition, it was reported that Sunnyside Senior Housing, LLC is owned by Steve Needle and Ray Rodgers. While Mr. Needle did at one time own an interest in the project, he is no longer in partnership with Mr. Rodgers and is no longer involved in that project. We regret the error.

Second Birdsall Executive Indicted in Fraud Probe

TRENTON — Thomas Rospos, a former executive vice-president for Birdsall Services Group, a large Monmouth County-based engineering firm with an office in Cranford, has been indicted by a state grand jury for his alleged role in a scheme in which the firm fraudulently avoided the restrictions of New Jersey's Pay-to-Play Act by disguising illegal corporate political contributions as personal contributions of employees of the firm.

On November 30, Philip Angarone, 40, of Hamilton, the former marketing director for Birdsall, admitted in court that he took part in the scheme, plead guilty to third-degree tampering with public records or information and fourth-degree prohibited corporation contributions through employees. He faces up to 364 days in jail and a term of probation. Rospos, 60, of Belmar, has been charged with 2nd-degree counts of conspiracy, making false representations for government contracts, misconduct by a corporate official, and money laun-

dering. Each of the counts carries a sentence of five to 10 years in prison. He was also charged with tampering with public records or information (3rd degree), falsifying or tampering with records (4th degree), prohibited corporation contributions through employees (4th degree), and concealment or misrepresentation of contributions or expenditures (4th degree). Rospos allegedly made hundreds of personal contributions to campaigns and political organizations across the state, both Republican and Democratic, in excess of \$150,000 that were illegally reimbursed by Birdsall.

Under the scheme, Birdsall shareholders and employees would make personal political contributions of \$300 or less, which are deemed unreportable, and shareholders and employees would then be illegally reimbursed with bonus payments, and the firm would falsely omit the contributions in documents filed with the Election Law Enforcement Commission (ELEC).

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2012 Year In Review, Part 1

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on December 20, 2011. The court order was issued in response to a builder's remedy suit brought against the township by Cranford Development Associates, L.L.C., a subsidiary of the S. Hekemian Group of Paramus.

After a two-hour public hearing during which members of the public begged, accused and challenged the Cranford Township Committee not to amend a supplement to the township's land-use ordinance to create an inclusionary multi-family residence zone, the committee adopted the ordinance.

Garwood

A committee of three borough residents began the process of recalling Garwood Councilman Jim Mathieu. The councilman, elected to a three-year term in November 2010, caused a storm locally for his actions: from allegations of harassment by Borough Clerk Christina Ariemma that is the subject of a lawsuit against the mayor and borough council, to his questioning of crossing guards regarding unemployment benefits they collect during summer months.

Litigation between The Pointe and the borough concerning snow and

garbage removal was concluded, after a hearing that lasted about eight months. Borough Attorney Joseph Triarsi expected to hear the judge's written decision in about two weeks.

Mountainside

At a board of education (BOE) meeting, Mountainside Education Association President Suzanne Jenks told the BOE, "We are here tonight to voice our frustration over not having an agreement for over two years." Approximately 40 members of the union stood behind Ms. Jenks. Most were attired in black as a symbol of solidarity.

County

The Freeholders voted 7-0 to privatize occupational, physical and speech therapy services at Runnells Specialized Hospital. The \$1.9-million, one-year contract was given to Kennett Square, Pa.-based Genesis ElderCare Rehabilitation Services, Inc. According to the resolution, the contract will save the county \$376,037 while also producing \$1.5 million in new revenues for the county.

The second half of the end-of-the-year review, June through November, will be published in the January 3 edition.

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