

# ADE DAILY NEWS CLIPS

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## **Couple dead after fire at home; arson suspected (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)**

Hours after Donna and Donald Creer died after a blaze in their Leawood neighborhood home in Little Rock, the house they shared for 20 years showed no obvious signs of fire Wednesday morning.

The only clues to the early morning fire that killed the couple, who were well known in state and national gospel and education circles, was the yellow police tape left wrapped around the front yard and a faint smell of smoke.

According to Little Rock police spokesman Sgt. Cassandra Davis, fire investigators told detectives the fire was intentionally set. However, Little Rock Fire Department Capt. Randy Hickmon said it is too early to tell how or where the fire started.

Little Rock fire crews reached the 405 Markwood Drive home at 3:50 a.m., according to fire officials, who said the fire was doused in only a few minutes.

Homicide investigators with the Little Rock Police Department were at the couple's home by 4:15 a.m. after firefighters found "suspicious" circumstances, which Davis said she could not elaborate on.

Neither Donna Creer, 57, nor Donald Creer, 50, showed any signs of injury, according to Davis.

Hickmon said the "smoke is probably what got them," though, the official cause of death will be determined by the state medical examiner's office.

There was no sign of forced entry, police said, and the home's back door was unlocked.

Donna Creer was found in her bed and her husband was on the floor of the bedroom. They were taken to separate hospitals, where they were pronounced dead.

Davis said that while their deaths are "suspicious" and the fire that killed them was "intentionally" set, the deaths have not been ruled homicides.

"[Detectives] don't believe it was accidental," Davis said.

She said investigators have not ruled out suicide or murder-suicide.

Donna Creer's health and her recent hospitalization and diagnosis with Stage 4 uterine cancer are "most definitely" a component of the detectives' investigation, Davis said.

According to neighbors and friends, Donna Creer just recently returned from the hospital.

Olga Skorapa, who has lived next-door to the Creers for the past four years, woke up to firetrucks in her hilltop neighborhood Wednesday morning and was awakened again at 6 a.m. by a knock on the door from homicide detectives.

Skorapa said she spoke with Donald Creer while he was working in his yard not long after the couple learned about Donna Creer's life-threatening disease.

"His face was like ... I don't know. He's a singer ... an actor, he has a presence about him always," Skorapa said. "But he looked like a hero in despair. It was a lot."

"They were good, important people who contributed to the community," Skorapa said.

Carol Zorn, another of the Creers' next-door neighbors, she said she woke up and saw detectives taking fingerprints from a window at the house.

Even with a clear view of the bedroom window where the Creers were found, Zorn said she couldn't tell there had been a fire until she was approached by detectives.

"We were all just shocked," Zorn said. "Some people, you wouldn't think anything would never happen to them. That bothers me. I can't understand that."

Donald Creer was a flight attendant for Southwest Airlines, as well as a prominent, classically trained vocalist who has performed at high-profile concerts and events over the past few decades.

He was a member of the Art Porter Singers, a jazz, gospel and blues combo named after the Little Rock jazzman Art Porter.

Donna Creer was an inductee to the Broadcasters Hall of Fame who worked in several roles for several gospel radio stations including 94.9 Hallelujah FM, where she was an on-air announcer from 7 p.m. to midnight, according to her profile at the Broadcasters Hall of Fame website.

In addition to writing for several gospel publications, Donna Creer was the president of the Arkansas Gospel Announcers Guild as well as the second vice chairman for the National Gospel Announcers Guild.

She was completing her 26th year as the first and, to date, only executive director of the Magnet Review Committee in Pulaski County, an organization established as a result of a long-running federal school desegregation case.

As executive director, Creer had one-on-one contact with thousands of Pulaski County-area parents seeking information about magnet-school programs, enrollment procedures and waiting lists. She also knew most teachers and all administrators at each of the magnet schools.

“She was so well-loved and so well-known,” Felicia Hobbs, the longtime principal at Gibbs International Studies/Foreign Languages Magnet Elementary, said Wednesday about her friend and mentor of 20 years.

Hobbs said Creer was devoted to the education of children and to the magnet-school concept of promoting diversity.

“I remember when I was a new principal, Donna said to me, ‘Felicia, we have to scream the theme. When people walk into this building, they have to know that this school’s magnet theme is all about embracing the diversity of the student population,’” she said.

In the years since, Creer - always well-dressed, with neatly styled hair, and whose makeup usually included thick false eyelashes - visited the magnet school campuses regularly, Hobbs said. She attended as many student musical performances and honors assemblies as she could, and at every one of them she would cry.

“She would tell me, ‘Every child should have this opportunity. Every child should be able to do this,’” said Hobbs, recalling Creer’s explanation for her tears.

Sandy Luehrs, Creer’s administrative assistant, was at work at the Magnet Review Committee office Wednesday, responding to calls and visitors.

“She was a fantastic person, no doubt about it,” Luehrs said. “She taught me a lot of things, particularly about keeping the education of children at the forefront. She was always striving for equality in education and really believed in magnet schools.”

Sadie Mitchell, assistant superintendent in the Little Rock School District and chairman of the Magnet Review Committee, met Creer when both attended Henderson State University in 1975.

Mitchell said Creer became a master of the magnet school program, even to the point of national prominence as president of the Magnet Schools of America organization in 2000-2002.

“She created programs, monitored the progress, and maintained a level of excellence that was impeccable,” Mitchell said.

“She defended the magnet schools like a mother hen, forever standing ready to sustain the original purpose for the court-ordered ... schools. We will miss her service to the tri-districts. Most of all, we will miss her smile, her perfection and that ‘Donna Creer voice.’”

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## **Top grads named at LISA Academy (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)**

Spencer Michael Rogers, 18, of Sherwood graduated as valedictorian of the LISA Academy.

Katie Matney, 18, of Little Rock graduated as salutatorian.

Rogers, the son of Suzanne Rogers and Thomas Rogers, plans to attend Hendrix College in Conway. Matney, the daughter of Ronald and Katherine Matney, plans to attend Rhodes College in Memphis.

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## **Students Learn Bilingual Skills (nwaonline.com)**

SPRINGDALE — Some Springdale students might be able to communicate better with family members because of a bilingual summer program, said Luis Restrepo, assistant vice provost for diversity affairs at the University of Arkansas.

Sin Limites — Spanish for “no limits” — started as an after-school program at J.O. Kelly Middle School, Restrepo said. The program has been in place for a year and a half, but this is the first time the program has been extended into summer.

The name of the program was chosen because many Spanish-speaking students are labeled as limited English students, Restrepo said.

“With dual language you’re not limited,” he said.

Teachers in Arkansas are only allowed to teach in English unless the class is a language class, said Susan Moreno, a volunteer teacher in the program. Sin Limites gives students a way to learn bilingual skills outside the classroom.

Many students in the program have parents who only speak Spanish, Restrepo said. These students often have trouble communicating with their parents because they learn in English at school. They can lose their Spanish skills as they adapt to speaking only English, he said.

“Communication breaks down,” he said. “One mother said ‘Now I can start speaking with my son.’”

Roman Sanchez, 12, said his grandmother only speaks Spanish. He wanted to participate in the program so he can communicate with her.

“I hardly ever know what she’s saying,” he said.

Juan Chavez, 12, has trouble speaking with his parents at home because they only speak in Spanish, he said. Learning how to communicate with his parents was his main reason for participating.

“Most of the time, I don’t understand them,” he said.

Not being able to communicate with family members can result in a child not being able to learn values and concepts at home, said Sara VanDenHeuvel, resource manager of multicultural affairs at the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. Being able to communicate with family members also helps children to understand and identify with their culture.

“It helps to understand what’s important to your family,” she said.

Forty-three percent of last year's student population in Springdale was Latino, and 60 percent of the student population at J.O. Kelly is Latino, Restrepo said. Twenty-one percent of children in the U.S. speak a language other than English at home, according to the association's website.

Student Volunteers from Springdale High School, Har-Ber High School and Bentonville High School sang with and spoke to students in Spanish at Wednesday's session. Students worked on activities like reading, writing and crafts to strengthen their Spanish skills, Restrepo said.

Being bilingual can also help students academically, Restrepo said. It allows them to be more creative in their thought process because they are able to think critically in more than one language. Being bilingual helps children understand they can reference an item with more than one word, VanDenHeuvel said.

Fluency in multiple languages can help students once they enter the job field, VanDenHeuvel said. A bilingual employee is an asset to a company because most of the world is bilingual. About 66 percent of children in the world are raised bilingual, according to the Dana Foundation, a philanthropic organization for brain research and educational programs.

Sin Limites is presented as a partnership with the University of Arkansas Office of Latino Academic Advancement, Restrepo said. The free program began Tuesday and ends Friday.

Students must be in fifth, sixth or seventh grade, and must be able to understand some Spanish when it is spoken to them, Restrepo said. He wants to expand the program to students who want to learn Spanish, but have no background in the language.