

Port Washington NEWS

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Melissa Castillo, a 5-year-old kindergarten student at Sousa Elementary School and her grandmother, Blanca Savaria, 60, died as a result of injuries sustained in the suspicious residential house fire.



The fire, which broke out just before midnight last Friday night, engulfed the second and third floors of the house, causing a collapse of the third floor as well as the front dormers.

Eleven People Homeless

Suspicious Fire Kills Child and Two Women

By Georgette Bruenner and Christina Cronin Southard

On the front door an outline of a Christmas tree made of shiny green garland remains undisturbed. A tricycle lies on its side in the driveway. Cars drive slowly down the street while passengers inspect the unassuming brick and shingled house with its upper floors ravaged by the late night fire that took the lives of a 5-year-old girl, her grandmother and an unidentified woman last Friday night.

While appearing to be a well-tended single family home, with one front door, the legal two family residence at 11 Bernard Street had been the known home to at least 13 people. The Calderon family and their three older children who lived on the first floor escaped unharmed while three of the six men who lived in rooms on the upper floors sustained minor injuries.

The house had no smoke alarms, according to the Port Washington Police, and the fire has been deemed "suspicious" in origin by the Nassau County Homicide Squad. Just last August the Port Washington Police had lodged a complaint to the Town of North Hempstead Building Department that the house appeared to be overcrowded. According to Town spokeswoman, Ellen Markowski, the house was inspected last

October, but only from the exterior and no violations were reported. The house is owned by real estate developer Joseph Canigiani, who has said that until recently only three people lived in the house. The other tenants have admitted to paying

rent to Blanca Saravia.

The child, Melissa Castillo, a kindergarten student at Sousa Elementary School, was spending the night at her grandmother's last Friday night. The grandmother, Blanca Saravia, 60, was from El Salvador, cleaned hous-

es for a living and had lived in the second story room in the Bernard Street house for the last twelve years. She often baby-sat for her daughter's child.

Melissa lived nearby with her mother Patricia Castillo, a hard working woman, who was rais-

ing her daughter in an apartment on Port Washington Blvd. Although her parents were separated, Melissa saw her father Manuel Castillo frequently. He lived across the street from Mrs.

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Bagging Error Nightmare

Saga of Innocent Woman Arrested

By Christina Cronin Southard

"An aggressive security practice combined with a newspaper that prints the names of the accused, not the convicted, is a dangerous practice that can ruin innocent people's lives," states criminal lawyer Michael Vessa. So tells the tale of Judith Sloan.

Judith Sloan is a mother, young grandmother, writer and, along with her husband, Morton, a generous philanthropist. "Judith is a woman who scolds me for jaywalking in Manhattan which is followed by an hour discussion on the value of law," said Morton Sloan. The Sloans have lived quietly and comfortably in Flower Hill for 26 years in a life marked by hard work, love of family, charitable work and the satisfaction that results from a well ordered life.

However, a single incident that occurred on December 18 of last year has turned Judith Sloan's life into a topsy-turvy world of sleeplessness and anger with no place to vent the angst that Mrs. Sloan has endured for six weeks. On December 18, at 10 a.m., Mrs. Sloan was looking forward to a visit from her 6-month-old grandchild. In preparation, she swept into Genovese Drugs on Port Washington Boulevard sweeping the aisles collecting diapers, formula, bottles and, for herself, a \$7 tube of Neutrogena face cream. To speed up the process, as the cashier scanned the items, Mrs. Sloan bagged the merchandise herself. She paid \$40 for four bags of sundries using her American Express card. Upon leaving by the front entrance, the sensors at the door buzzed indicating that something

was awry. Mrs. Sloan voluntarily returned to the cashier where each item was retrieved from the bags and checked against her sales receipt. In the meantime, the store manager, Joe Pittelli, came onto the scene.

The box with the face cream in it had not been scanned. "I said okay, fine. Do you want me to put it on my American Express card or pay cash, whatever is easier?" Instead of answering her question, the manager took the four bags from her, said, "Come with me," and escorted her to the security office in the rear of the store. "They told me to sit down

and took my name and address," she said, which she did voluntarily. However, she asked, "What is happening here?" The manager replied that "this is what happens when people shoplift." She started explaining once again that this was a cashier error, not hers. She even went on to ask why would she put an unscanned item in the bag knowing it would set off the security system? When the manager, then joined by the assistant manager, said they would have to take her photograph and she would have to sign a statement,

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Another woman's body, mistakenly identified in early reports as Melissa's mother, was found in an upstairs bedroom and as of Tuesday had not been officially identified. She was reported to be about 30 years old. Neighbors said that they thought the woman's name was Rosa and that she may have also lived in the house.

Approximately 75 Port Washington firefighters battled the blaze for three hours in freezing temperatures, blinding snow and heavy winds. "The snow did not impede our progress," said Chief O'Reilly but "icicles were forming on the men's helmets and spray from the hoses quickly froze covering many of the men with a sheet of ice," he said. Special procedures had to be used to keep the equipment from freezing. Water had to flow continuously through the hoses so that they wouldn't freeze. The fire was finally

contained at about 3:00 a.m. but the investigation of the premises continued until approximately 7:30 a.m. on Saturday.

Police said that they are still investigating the cause of the fire, but believed that the fire started in a hallway. It has been called "suspicious" by Nassau County Homicide Det. Lt. Frank Guidice.

"We have certain concerns, like the location where the fire appears to have been started and certain other things that have to be explained," Guidice said. "We expect to make a determination within a few days," he added.

In the meantime a large extended family is grieving. Eleven people are now homeless and Patricia Castillo has lost her only daughter and her mother.

Services were held at Knolls Funeral Home on Wednesday and a funeral Mass will be held on Thursday morning, February 8 at St. Peter of Alcantara Church.