

Mom who died after casino boat fire had complained of breathing problems

Written by Administrator
Friday, 26 January 2018 05:13 -

Carrie Dempsey was bubbly and bright. The cheerful "Coupon Queen" led penny-pinching seminars at local libraries and had a warm, fluttering laugh often described as contagious.

She was healthy and active, a regular in fitness classes at the North Tampa YMCA. Yet the 42-year-old mother of two was the only passenger to die after jumping from a casino shuttle boat that caught fire off New Port Richey.

Her death remains a mystery to home owners along waterfront Harborpointe Drive. They quickly mobilized during the Jan. 14 fire to get all 50 passengers and crew from the frigid, shallow water and into heated garages and living rooms where they could wait for medical attention.

[PREVIOUS COVERAGE:](#) [Mother of two, 42, identified as casualty after Port Richey boat fire](#)

Emergency crews that night rushed 14 people to Bayonet Point Regional Medical Center in Hudson, worried that some could develop hypothermia. Hospital officials said eight of them were treated for minor injuries and released, shaken but alive. It seemed a happy ending to a potential tragedy.

Then later that night, Dempsey died in a hospital room. She told doctors at Bayonet Point she was having trouble breathing, but it may take months of lab testing for the Pasco-Pinellas Medical Examiner's Office to determine a cause of death.

Christine Hashim, a nurse who lives along Harborpointe Drive, said she helped examine passengers that night, separating out those in need of immediate medical treatment.

Dempsey told Hashim the bottom of her feet were hurting, the nurse said. There were no cuts, only a few bruises likely left from walking across barnacles and other debris while wading to shore. Still, despite the chaos, Hashim took note of how distraught Dempsey seemed.

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PREVIOUS COVERAGE: [Casino shuttle boat destroyed by fire as 50 passengers abandon ship in frigid Gulf](#)

"I remember watching her crying as she talked on a cell phone and then, for some reason, she went to a different neighbor's house across the street from the house where we were sending people to stay warm," Hashim said.

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Dempsey's parents were the first of her relatives to arrive in the neighborhood, Hashim said. A security guard stationed at the gated entrance later told residents that the couple, Jules and Renee Deutsch, were frantic as they tried to force their way inside.

The family quickly collected Dempsey and drove her to Bayonet Point. She said her throat was closing up.

The doctors told her parents that Dempsey was experiencing a severe allergic reaction to an unknown chemical she had inhaled in the thick smoke from the burning boat, said Belinda Rensch, the Deutschs' next-door neighbor and friend.

Swelling in her throat choked off her breathing, and staff began making arrangements to transport her to the Regional Burn Center at Tampa General Hospital, where she could be seen by specialists, Rensch said. But before she could make the trip, around 10 p.m., Dempsey stopped breathing altogether.

"It's just such a freak thing, it's hard for them to even wrap their heads around what happened," Rensch said. "I could understand if she had asthma or some other condition where you might be prepared, but her family has no idea what allergic reaction could have caused this, or why it only happened to her."

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William Pellán, director of investigations with the Pasco-Pinellas Medical Examiner's office, didn't discount the family's account but declined to comment on an official cause of death while tests are pending. No other passengers complained of similar symptoms, Pellán said, and enough time has passed that they need not be concerned about falling ill.

"Anytime there's a fire where dangerous chemicals are involved, there's risk of inhaling high concentrations of (carbon dioxide) among a number of other things that can be very dangerous, if not fatal," Pellán said.

"Everyone reacts differently to different triggers based on their own body composition, so it's difficult to guess at what might trigger such a violent reaction."

The smoke contained a number of chemicals, he said, from fiberglass, fuel, cleaning chemicals and everything else aboard the 72-foot, wood-hulled Island Lady as it burned to the water line.

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Officials with the U.S. Coast Guard and the National Transportation Safety Board have released few details about the fire, citing an ongoing investigation. Because someone died, the Pasco Sheriff's Office must decide if it will pursue a criminal case.

Dempsey's family has declined to speak with reporters and has asked friends and neighbors to do the same.

Still, many have turned to the Internet to grieve her loss on social media posts and a GoFundMe.com campaign. They describe a woman who was an "outstanding mother," with an "infectious optimistic happiness."

The fund-raising effort has drawn contributions from hundreds of people, most of them strangers who are eager to help Dempsey's 12-year-old twins, Chad and Megan.

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"She always kept me laughing," wrote Renee Winoker, who met Dempsey — Carrie Deutsch at the time — as a teenager when her family moved to Tampa from Beachwood, Ohio, in the late 1980s. "She had a spunky, independent, strong spirit and was so much fun to be around."

Apprentice coupon-clippers who faithfully attended Dempsey's "super couponing seminars" wrote that they'll continue meeting without their leader, the "Coupon Queen." The Bob Sierra Family YMCA, 4029 Northdale Blvd, has begun collecting money for the twins, who lost their father to diabetes in 2011.

"She joined our YMCA for a healthy body, mind and spirit and got more than she signed up for at the Y ... individuals that cared for her as a sister, mentors to help make healthy choices and an experience for her twins to participate in special activities," trainer Shannon Cooper wrote in messages to fellow members.

The children moved last week from their home in Lutz' exclusive Cheval community to live with their grandparents in Carrollwood. School district officials say the children can stay at Martinez Middle School even though they're leaving its attendance zone.

Donations to the GoFundMe.com page, posted by volunteers and staff at Martinez Middle, reached \$44,500 in eight days. More than 550 people have contributed in amounts ranging from \$5 to \$1,500. Many are anonymous.

Contact Anastasia Dawson at [\[email protected\]](#) or (813) 226-3377. Follow @adawsonwrites.

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