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First civil-union couple parting ways; one seeks restraining order, citing violence

By: Associated Press

BRATTLEBORO, Vt. -- A lesbian couple who entered into the nation's first same-sex civil union are splitting up amid allegations of violent behavior.

Carolyn Conrad, 35, asked a court in October to end her relationship with Kathleen Peterson, 46.

Conrad also obtained a restraining order Wednesday against her partner, saying Peterson punched a hole in the wall during an argument and threatened to harm a friend.

"All I want to say is that the civil union was a big source of pride for me, and now it's not," Peterson said.

The two had been together for five years when they were legally joined in Brattleboro minutes after Vermont's civil-union law took effect on July 1, 2000. Two years ago, the couple were offering relationship advice on the gay-rights Web site.

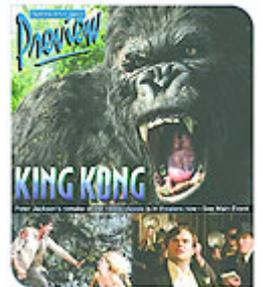
Bari Shamas, a member of the Vermont Freedom to Marry Task Force, said gay relationships are prone to the same difficulties as heterosexual marriages.

"There's no proof that our relationships are any better than heterosexual relationships," Shamas said.



Carolyn Conrad, right, and Kathleen Peterson sign their civil union license at the town clerks' office at midnight in this Saturday, July 1, 2000 file photo. The two women who entered into what is believed to be the first legally recognized same-sex union in the country are splitting up. Conrad has asked a judge to end the civil union she entered into with Peterson moments after Vermont's civil unions law took effect on July 1, 2000. Associated Press file photo

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Icy weather causes power outages to more than 450,000 in South

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) -- A blast of freezing rain across Georgia and the Carolinas on Thursday closed schools, snarled traffic and caused power outages to more than 450,000 customers. At least one death was blamed on the storm when an ice-laden tree crashed through a man's house.

"Ice is our greatest nemesis, much worse than snow," said Lucinda Trew, spokeswoman for Duke Power, the main provider of electricity in the hardest-hit parts of the Carolinas.

The widespread outages were caused by the ice that formed on tree limbs and fell onto power lines. In Kannapolis, N.C., just north of Charlotte, N.C., authorities say the weight of that ice buckled a 100-foot-tall tree that crushed 58-year-old David Ralph Jones while reclined on a couch in his living room.

While electricity was quickly restored to some, outages by early evening still totaled 260,000 in South Carolina's upstate, 113,000 in western and central North Carolina, 55,000 in northeast Georgia and 34,700 in the Atlanta area.

"The trees and power lines are down everywhere on the road. It's just dangerous to be out," said Rebecca Neal, who was using blankets to keep warm in her powerless Greenville home and thinking about finding a hotel for the night.

Earlier in the day, Neal had gone to her job at a public relations firm, only to find that her office didn't have power either.

School systems canceled or cut short classes across north Georgia, the affected parts of the Carolinas and into western stretches of Virginia.

Mountains of North Carolina and Virginia were being hit with a hazardous mix of snow and sleet.

"Snow we can plow. Ice we can't," said Virginia Department of Transportation spokesman Chuck Lionberger.

The wintry mix was blamed for a school bus accident in Cherokee County, on the northern end of suburban Atlanta. The driver swerved to avoid a large tree branch that had fallen across the road, forcing the vehicle's rear tires to slide off the road. None of the 23 students aboard the bus was injured.

The National Weather Service said the freezing rain was expected to continue in the region through Thursday evening and overnight temperatures were forecast to dip into the 20s. Ice accumulations were expected to be as much as three-quarters of an inch, which could lead to more snapped limbs and power lines.

Duke Power's Trew said there was no timetable when power would be restored but a warming trend Friday would help, with 7,500 workers being dispatched to the task.

"Temperatures are slowly warming, degree by degree, so the melting is under way after a very significant ice storm," said Doug Outlaw of the National Weather Service office at the Greenville-Spartanburg Airport.

Nepalese soldier ends argument with villagers by killing 11 civilians

KATMANDU, Nepal (AP) -- A Nepalese soldier ended an argument with a group of villagers by spraying them with bullets, killing at least 11 people, officials and witnesses said Thursday.

Another 19 civilians were injured in the shooting late Wednesday, the Royal Nepalese Army said in a statement.

The killings in Nagarkot, about 15 miles northeast of Katmandu, drew about 200 protesters Thursday to the hospital where the injured were taken.

Hours later, about 15,000 protesters led by an alliance of seven political parties marched through Katmandu demanding that King Gyanendra restore democracy and condemning the killings.

"We want democracy!" and "Down with autocratic regime!" the protesters shouted, carrying banners and red-and-white party flags. The rally had been planned previously, but quickly turned into a

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protest against the killings.

Since the king seized absolute power earlier this year, saying he needed total control to defeat Maoist rebels, the army has faced increasing criticism from human rights groups for using excessive force and killing civilians.

Several officials and soldiers have been punished by the army for abuses and murder.

But many say officials have not done enough.

"Our alliance condemns the killing and the attempt to cover up the massacre at Nagarkot," said Bharat Yadav, a member of the Nepal Sadbhavna Party.

"This autocratic regime is responsible for the massacre," said Narayan Man Bijuchche of the Nepal Workers and Peasants Party.

The parties have called for a general strike in Katmandu on Friday to protest the killing.

The army statement identified the soldier who opened fire as Basudev Thapa and said he was killed in the incident. It did not elaborate.

"It appears to be the act of madness of just one soldier," said Brig. Gen. B.A. Kumar Sharma, chief of the army's human rights cell. "We are not sure how the soldier died but he succumbed to bullet injuries."

He said the shooting was being investigated and a report would be ready within three days.

The government also announced a separate independent investigation headed by former Supreme Court Judge Top Bahadur Singh.

The announcement also said each victim's family would be given \$2,000 as compensation and would cover the cost of medical treatment for the injured.

Dr. Achyut Sharma said the victims were shot in the stomach and limbs.

Details of the shooting were scant, but villagers said the soldier may have been drunk and got into an argument with some villagers near Nagarkot.

"He returned at night with a gun and started firing," said Santa Bahadur Tamang, whose 30-year-old nephew was killed.

Tamang, who was protesting outside the hospital, said villagers heard a single shot, followed by continuous firing.

Initial reports from the military said soldiers could have opened fire after mistaking the villagers for communist rebels.

The rebels, who say they are inspired by Chinese communist revolutionary Mao Zedong, have been fighting since 1996 to topple Nepal's monarchy and establish a communist state. About 12,000 people have died in the insurgency.

Mona Lisa smiling because she was happy, scientists say

AMSTERDAM, Netherlands (AP) -- The mysterious half-smile that has intrigued viewers of the Mona Lisa for centuries isn't really that difficult to interpret, Dutch researchers said Thursday.

She was smiling because she was happy -- 83 percent happy, to be exact, according to scientists from the University of Amsterdam.

In what they viewed as a fun demonstration of technology rather than a serious experiment, the researchers scanned a reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's masterpiece and subjected it to cutting-edge "emotion recognition" software, developed in collaboration with the University of Illinois.

The result showed the painting's famous subject was 83 percent happy, 9 percent disgusted, 6 percent fearful and 2 percent angry. She was less than 1 percent neutral, and not at all surprised.

Leonardo began work on the painting in 1503, and it now hangs in the Louvre in Paris.

The work, also known as "La Gioconda," is believed to have portrayed the wife of Francesco del Giocondo. The title is a play on her husband's name, and also means "the jolly lady" in Italian.

Harro Stokman, a professor at the University of Amsterdam involved in the experiment, said the researchers knew the results would be unscientific -- the software isn't designed to register subtle emotions. So it couldn't detect the hint of sexual suggestion or disdain many have read into Mona Lisa's eyes.

In addition, the technology is designed for use with modern digital films and images, and subjects first need to be scanned in a neutral emotionless state to accurately detect their current emotion.

Lead researcher Nicu Sebe took the challenge as seriously as he could, using the faces of 10 women of Mediterranean ancestry to create a composite image of a neutral expression. He then compared that to the face in the painting, scoring it on the basis of six emotions: happiness, surprise, anger, disgust, fear and sadness.

"Basically, it's like casting a spider web over the face to break it down into tiny segments," Stokman said. "Then you look for minute differences in the flare of the nostril or depth of the wrinkles around the eyes."

Stokman said with a reading of 83 percent, it's clear happiness was the woman's main emotion.

Biometrics experts not involved with the experiment said the results were interesting even if they aren't the last word on the Mona Lisa.

"Facial recognition technology is advancing rapidly, but emotional recognition is really still in its infancy," said Larry Hornak, director of the Center for Identification Technology Research at West Virginia University.

"It sounds like they did try to use a data set, even if it was small, and that's typical of work in an area like this that's relatively new. It's an interesting result," he said.

Stokman said he knew the University of Amsterdam effort won't prove or disprove controversial theories about the painting. One is that it was actually a self-portrait of Leonardo himself as a woman.

"But who knows, in 30, 40, 50 years, maybe they'll be able to tell what was on her mind," Stokman said.

Hornak agreed the idea was entertaining.

"It's always fun to apply technology to areas of public interest, and sometimes you can come up with results that are very illuminating," he said.

Jim Wayman, a biometrics researcher at San Jose State University agreed.

"It's hocus pocus, not serious science," Wayman said. "But it's good for a laugh, and it doesn't hurt anybody."

Japanese zoo officials put plump penguins on winter exercise regime

TOKYO (AP) -- It's wintertime and the king penguins at a zoo in northern Japan are putting on weight. But the keepers there have a solution: exercise.

Officials at Asahiyama Zoo on Thursday started taking the penguins on 500-yard walks on the snowy grounds twice a day, zoo spokesman Tetsuo Yamazaki said.

"Just like in humans ... the fat accumulates during the winter months, and the blood-sugar level rises," Yamazaki said.

The zoo's 15 king penguins aren't exactly obese. Penguin winter weight varies from 33 pounds to 40 pounds, said zoo official Kazunobu Maru. So far, only one of the flock is 40 pounds, he said.

The reason for weight gain is natural.

"In order to withstand the cold, the penguins have a habit of standing very still during winter months," Yamazaki said, while in the summer they can swim as much as they want.

To fend off obesity, the zoo instituted the winter exercise program in 2003.

The penguins have tender webbed feet and can walk significant distances only on snow, so the program can take place only during the colder months.

The zoo, on the northern island of Hokkaido about 550 miles northwest of Tokyo, takes the penguins on strolls from December until April.

Man says he cut down airport pine tree because he couldn't afford to buy one for Christmas

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. (AP) -- A man pleaded guilty to cutting down a pine tree at the airport, saying he did it because he couldn't afford to buy a Christmas tree.

Police said they cracked the case because Bart Bellin dropped his checkbook at the scene. Officers went to his apartment and found the tree.

Bellin, 30, was scolded by the judge in court for the Nov. 28 incident outside Gerald R. Ford International Airport.

"This is a Christmas tree for a blessed time of year," said District Judge Sara Smolenski. "... What were you thinking?"

"It was a foolish choice," Bellin told her. "I wish I could take it back."

He said it took only a few minutes to cut down the 6-foot tree with a handsaw.

Bellin pleaded guilty to larceny and destruction of property. Sentencing is Feb. 8.

The tree was turned over to a ministry, which gave it to a family.

Man who served 7 years in mother-in-law's murder is cleared by DNA evidence

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) -- A man who spent seven years behind bars for the rape and murder of his mother-in-law was released Thursday after DNA evidence from a cigarette butt helped clear him.

Clarence Elkins, 42, walked out of the Mansfield Correctional Institution with his wife, Melinda.

Elkins was convicted in the 1998 rape and murder of Judith Johnson, 58, as well as the rape of her 6-year-old granddaughter. He was sentenced to life in prison and would not have been eligible for parole until 2054,

DNA analysis of a pubic hair and other biological material on the victims showed that Elkins was not the killer, said Bill Canterbury, spokesman for the Summit County prosecutor's office, which tried the case in 1998.

Also, Elkins helped secure a DNA sample of the investigation's current focus -- fellow inmate Earl Gene Mann -- by retrieving a cigarette butt Mann had used. And authorities said a DNA analysis connected Mann to the slayings.

Elkins learned of his impending release from his wife, who said she told him: "Pack your bags, you're coming home baby."

"When my wife told me I was coming home today for good, I was just overwhelmed with joy and tears of joy. I was amazed it was so soon. I thought it was going to drag out," Elkins said in a telephone interview before his release.

Mann, 32, is serving a seven-year sentence for raping three girls. He has not been charged with the offenses for which Elkins went to prison, but Canterbury said he recently failed five polygraph tests about his role in the crimes.

Mann had a relationship with a woman who lived near one of the victims, Canterbury said.

Fire at China hospital kills at least 33

BEIJING (AP) -- A fire swept through a hospital in northeastern China on Thursday, killing at least

33 people, including patients, state media said.

Witnesses were quoted by the Xinhua News Agency as saying that some people leapt from the burning hospital buildings in Jilin province. It was not immediately clear whether those who jumped were among the dead.

At least some of the victims were patients who died while being transferred to other hospitals, the news agency said.

The fire started at about 5 p.m. Thursday at the largest hospital in Liaoyuan city, about 75 miles southwest of Changchun, the capital of Jilin province, witnesses said.

Earlier Thursday, China's Ministry of Public Security said there were 222,000 accidental fires in China, resulting in more than 2,000 deaths, from January to November, Xinhua said.

In recent weeks, China has experienced a number of major accidents, including a rash of coal mining disasters that claimed several hundred lives and a major chemical spill in a river that forced water supplies to be shut off to the northern city of Harbin.

Former 'Sopranos' actor, another man held without bail, charged with killing N.Y. police officer

NEW YORK (AP) -- A former "Sopranos" actor and another man were ordered held without bail Thursday at a hearing in the hospital where both men are being treated for gunshot wounds inflicted by the police officer they are charged with killing.

Lillo Brancato Jr., who appeared on several episodes of the HBO series and also appeared in 1995's "A Bronx Tale" with Robert De Niro, was arraigned on a second-degree murder charge by Bronx Criminal Court Judge Michael Sonberg.

Steven Armento was arraigned separately on a first-degree murder charge and could face life in prison without parole if convicted. Neither man spoke or entered a plea at the hearing in a conference room at Jacobi Medical Center.

The arraignments came one day after about 20,000 police officers turned out at the funeral for Officer Daniel Enchautegui, 28, who was off duty last Saturday when he responded to the sound of breaking glass in a neighbor's apartment.

According to authorities, the two suspects were trying to burglarize the apartment and steal prescription drugs.

Assistant District Attorney Terry Gottlieb said Brancato had given statements to police that Enchautegui identified himself as a police officer and ordered them to freeze, then Armento started shooting.

The prosecutor added that Armento, after the shooting, told police, "I thought I'd shoot him first because I thought he was going to shoot us."

The mortally wounded officer returned fire, striking Brancato twice and Armento six times.

Both men are due back in court on Jan. 9.

Enchautegui was the second New York police officer killed in the past two weeks.

Remains of Nazi-era Jews found in German mass grave reburied

STUTTGART, Germany (AP) -- Remains believed to be of 34 Jews who died doing slave labor for the Nazis were re-interred with full religious rites Thursday at the U.S. Army airfield where their mass grave was discovered.

Tel Aviv chief rabbi Israel Meir Lau, a Holocaust survivor who was formerly Israel's chief rabbi, was among about 300 people who attended the ceremony at the airfield, next to Stuttgart's airport.

Lau joined several other speakers in using the occasion to denounce remarks made Wednesday by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad that the Holocaust is a "myth."

"We must invite him to Stuttgart and show him that it is no myth, but instead a fact that is a painful

and unforgettable part of our lives," Lau said.

The remains were found in September during construction work at the airfield. They are believed to be the bodies of Jewish inmates from part of the Natzweiler-Struthof concentration camp who were used as slave laborers between November 1944 and February 1945.

Some 119 people from 12 European countries died of hunger and typhus during that period, said Guenther Oettinger, governor of the southwestern state of Baden-Wuerttemberg.

Nineteen bodies were cremated at the time, and another 66 corpses were found buried nearby in October 1945, shortly after World War II ended.

Stuttgart prosecutors had planned on doing DNA analysis of the remains to establish beyond a doubt who they were, but they backed down after Jewish organizations protested that the remains should be left alone for religious reasons.

The remains were reburied in the same place they were found.

Oettinger pledged that authorities would research the site's history and erect a memorial stone there.

"We want to try to learn more about the history of their lives and suffering, which is also ours," Oettinger said. "One can repress our history, but not forget it. We must, therefore, ensure that such wrongs cannot be repeated."

Woman pleads no contest to driving with two children in trunk

SAN FERNANDO -- A Gardena woman who allowed two youngsters to ride in the trunk of her car faces sentencing Jan. 11 after pleading no contest to child endangerment, a prosecutor said Thursday.

Laverne Renee Dunlap, 35, entered the plea yesterday in San Fernando Superior Court. The plea agreement calls for her to receive three years probation and one year in jail, Deputy District Attorney Carolyn McNary said.

Dunlap had seven children in her compact car when she was stopped on the Antelope Valley (14) Freeway around 8 p.m. May 20, police said. Officers found a boy, 15, and a girl, 10, in the trunk, authorities said.

Another driver reported seeing Dunlap's car earlier at the side of the San Diego (405) Freeway near the National Boulevard offramp, authorities said. The motorist told the California Highway Patrol that children were inside the trunk and that the lid was being closed by a woman.

Dunlap said shortly after her arrest that she did not have enough room in her car for all her passengers and that she "wasn't thinking," authorities said.

---- **North County Times wire services**



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