Housekeeper trapped in billionaire's New York townhouse elevator for days

Erik Schreiber
1 February 2019

On Monday, January 28, Marites Fortaliza, a housekeeper was rescued from a broken elevator in a townhouse on Manhattan's exclusive Upper East Side. She had been trapped for at least 60 hours in the New York residence of the family of Warren Stephens, a billionaire hedge-fund manager based in Arkansas.

A resident of Queens, Fortaliza had been cleaning the townhouse on the previous Friday, when the elevator became stuck between the second and third floors. Fortaliza was the only person in the building and remained trapped throughout the weekend without food or water in what was essentially a three-foot-by-four-foot metal box.

When a courier attempted to deliver a package on the following Monday and received no response, he called the building's owners, who had been away for the weekend. The Stephenses dispatched a family member to the house, who called 911 when she realized that Fortaliza was trapped inside the elevator. Firefighters arrived at about 10 a.m. and forced open the elevator doors.

When she was carried on a stretcher from the building, Fortaliza appeared calm, according to bystanders. Although her condition seemed good, she was taken to the hospital, where she stayed "to get a good rest," according to her husband.

Fortaliza's hospital stay was necessary because, even after a relatively short period of solitary confinement such as she endured, a person's physical health begins to deteriorate. Symptoms like those of hypertension, such as chronic headaches, trembling, and heart palpitations, can develop, along with oversensitivity to normal stimuli. Mental health declines, as well. A person can lose the ability to think clearly or concentrate and may suffer hallucinations. Other potential negative psychological effects include panic, rage, anxiety, and thoughts of self-harm and suicide.

Warren and Harriet Stephens purchased the townhouse in 1999 for what would now be a cheap $8 million. In a statement reminiscent of a corporate memo, the family said, "The employee involved has been a valued member of the Stephens extended family for 18 years." In a self-congratulatory tribute, the statement added: "A Stephens family member accompanied her to the hospital this morning and remains at her side."

Warren Stephens is from a social stratum whose privileges are light-years away from those of Fortaliza and her family and neighbors in Queens. He is president, chair, and CEO of the Stephens Inc. investment bank that his father and uncle founded in 1933. During his career at the bank, Stephens has aided various major companies that are as remorseless as they are profit-hungry. Notable examples include his facilitation of the initial public offering of Wal-Mart and his advising of Tyson Foods in its battle to acquire Holly Farms.

Stephens obtained all the outstanding shares in the family business from his other relatives in 2006, and *Forbes* magazine now estimates his net worth at $2.6 billion. Over the years, Stephens has supported the political campaigns of reactionaries such as Bob Dole, Steve Forbes, and Mitt Romney: all staunch defenders of corporate bandits and financial parasites. In 2016, he belonged to the anti-Trump faction of the Republican party.

In typical corporate language, the Stephens family claimed in their statement on Fortaliza's harrowing three days that "The cause of this unfortunate incident is being investigated, and appropriate measures will be taken to ensure that something like this never happens again,"

© World Socialist Web Site

But this turned out to be one of the lies that this layer of the richest Americans spouts out in great quantities every day, as subsequent events showed when, later that Monday, Devon Simmons, a Department of Buildings inspector for New York City, arrived at the Stephens townhouse to conduct tests on the elevator to identify the cause of the elevator's breakdown. He knocked on the front door but was not admitted into the building.

If a building is not monitored continuously, its elevators are required to have buttons or phones that can call for emergency assistance. Simmons did not know whether the elevator in the townhouse was equipped with these features or if they were in working order. It seems unlikely, since Fortaliza would have used them to summon help. Because Simmons was not admitted inside, the Department of Buildings issued a violation later that day. Notably it was not the first; the building was the subject of a previous violation under Stephens's ownership in 2008.

This incident perfectly encapsulates the relationship between the thin layer of the super-rich, many of whom have second, third, and fourth homes in Manhattan and elsewhere around the country and the world, and the working class. While the financiers and corporate bosses relax on weekend getaways, their employees toil unseen and unconsidered. Proper workplace maintenance and safety precautions are neglected or eliminated when they do not concern the personal safety of the owners. Civil fines are ignored or brushed aside, and inspectors are turned away.

Instead of enjoying the standard of living, cultural opportunities, social lives, and medical care that the ruling class enjoys, the workers who create all of the wealth in society suffer accidents made possible by their bosses' neglect. These accidents unfailingly prompt stern vows to investigate and prevent future horrors, only to recur at regular intervals. Unlike thousands of other workers who die on the job every year in the United States, Fortaliza is lucky that the accident she suffered was not fatal.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site