

48-year-old teacher perishes in house fire on Chicago's southwest side

Kristina Betinis
6 February 2019

Very early Monday morning February 4, firefighters responded to a blaze at a home on 18th Place and Peoria in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood. Kathleen Gomez had been badly injured in the fire and was rescued from the home after 2 a.m. by firefighters. However, Gomez was pronounced dead later Monday at Northwestern Memorial Hospital.

A firefighter was also injured in the blaze, which is reported to have begun on second floor. The homes on the block date from the 1880s.

Gomez was a teacher in the Chicago Public Schools district where she taught English as a second language classes at Gage Park High School and was transferring to Roberto Clemente Community Academy.

While the cause of the fire remains officially undetermined, family and friends said there were multiple problems with the heating in recent months, and difficult front door locks may also have contributed to her death. Fire officials reported no smoke detectors in the house.

The Gomez family is reported to have maintained and developed property in the Bridgeport and Pilsen neighborhoods, according to the *Chicago Tribune*.

In August 2018, an early morning house fire devastated the working class community of Chicago's Little Village neighborhood on the city's west side, which neighbors Pilsen. That fire killed 10 children, nine of whom were relatives of the same family: Amayah Almaraz, 3 months; Alanni Ayala, 3; Gialanni Ayala, 5; Ariel Garcia, 5; Giovanni Ayala, 10; Xavier Contreras, 11; Nathan Contreras, 13; Adrian Hernandez, 14; Cesar Contreras, 14; and family friend Victor Mendoza, 16.

Within three weeks, reports into the investigation of that fire and its impact on the community all but disappeared from mainstream media outlets.

Gomez's family and friends recalled her as a generous, warm and gregarious person who was active in the neighborhood and her church community.

Neighbors who spoke to the WSWWS gave a sense of how traumatic the fire was and the sense of loss they have after Gomez's death. Those that saw the firefighters rescue her said they would never forget it. Anthony explained: "It was so shocking. We watched them bring out her lifeless body. God forbid, it could have been any of us."

On Tuesday evening, Gomez's memory was shared among family and friends at her apartment. WSWWS reporters spoke with Gomez's sister, Donna, and neighbors Steve, Anthony and Eddie.

Donna thanked friends, family and other visitors coming to the site of the fire to light candles and leave flowers on the stoop.

Donna told the WSWWS, "Everything is undetermined. We don't know what happened, or how or why. There's no known cause. She didn't have smoke detectors. You know, I checked my house and I didn't have them either. You don't think about it the way you should. So, I got mine today and I will make sure I definitely always have them. This was a tragic, unnecessary death."

"I saw her on Saturday, we hung out" Eddie noted. "We had a great time and then she told me, 'Take me to my friend's house because my heater is not working.' I took her to her girlfriend's house, another schoolteacher."

Donna added, "She told my mom she wasn't staying here for a couple days!"

"I can't figure it out. She didn't smoke and her heater wasn't working. So what happened? I don't know how the fire started," Eddie said. "I'm going to miss her so much. She was a real positive person."

Another friend said: “I just saw her. She came out to say happy birthday to me this weekend, to show us her new Jeep. She told me she had problems with her heater since April. She said she finally found somebody that fixed it.”

Eddie said: “We weren’t expecting that. Especially we three, we were all together just the day before.”

Donna shared that her mother and family have been devastated by Kathleen’s death.

Steve shared that Kathy was well liked in the community. He also said she was security conscious and had many hard locks on the door of the home. “She had some tenants downstairs that gave her a real hard time. They wouldn’t leave and then she had to add locks.”

As everyone gathered for a photo, Steve said, “Kathy we love you, you were so giving.”

“I know my sister was very loved,” Donna said. A wake for Kathy Gomez may be held later this week.

The recent extreme cold weather has brought out the dangers involved in the advanced decay of the city’s infrastructure in working-class and middle-class neighborhoods. During the so-called “polar vortex” there were two fires in the Pilsen neighborhood due to the dependence on space heaters and other unofficial forms of home heating.

The relative commonality of the danger of fire deaths in the city of Chicago has been exposed by the fires in Pilsen and Little Village. Additionally, the WSWS spoke with several Pilsen and Bridgeport residents who they felt like they couldn’t report violations because it meant repairs that would drive up rents.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact