



## Family of 4 dies of CO poisoning in Merrillville home

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CHICAGO (Sun-Times Media Wire) - Janet Yaros knew something wasn't right at the white two-story house next door, where a family of four had just moved in Saturday.

"You don't see people coming out of the house, no shades were drawn. There was no activity whatsoever," Yaros said Thursday.

The day before, four people -- Michael Nichols, 41, Kennetha Purnell, 38, Matthew Nichols, 13, and Morgan Nichols, 11 -- were found dead in the home in the 800 block of West 70th Avenue in Merrillville, the Post-Tribune is reporting.

None of the four had any other injuries. Police suspect carbon monoxide poisoning, but an exact cause of death will not be confirmed until police receive the results of toxicology tests.

A gasoline-powered generator in the home's attached garage had cords connected to "various electronics" in the home, police said. All of the home's exterior doors and windows were closed.

Officers conducting a welfare check found the family about 5:30 p.m. Wednesday, according to a statement from the Merrillville police department.

Police had been summoned by relatives who first came to Yaros' door to ask if she'd seen anything at the house.

"When (Purnell's) mother and sister came to my door last night I knew something was very wrong," Yaros said.

She said the relatives asked her if she'd seen any activity at the house. She said they were worried because Purnell hadn't shown up at work at Chicago State University the last couple of days, which was unlike her.

Purnell served as assistant to the dean of the College of Education at Chicago State, a post she had held since February 2008, according to the school.

Wednesday, after Yaros told the relatives she had seen no activity at the house, the relatives called police, who went inside the house.

"All of a sudden there was crime tape around the house and the sister was hysterical," Yaros said.

Yaros said Purnell was "a very nice lady." She hadn't met the kids, having seen them only from a distance.

Yaros said the family was renting the house.

The owner of the house is an elderly woman who now lives near relatives in Michigan, said Yaros, who has lived at her house for 16 years. The family of the owner of the home declined to comment when contacted Thursday by the Post-Tribune.

A person who answered the phone at the district office of Merrillville Community Schools Corp. confirmed the two children attended Merrillville schools, but gave no other information.

Police believe all four people died from carbon monoxide poisoning. The family was moving into the home and did not have the power turned on, police said.

NIPSCO confirmed the power had been shut off by the previous tenant on Oct. 8 and had not been turned back on.

"Yesterday's tragic event was an unfortunate reminder about the potential dangers of carbon monoxide and our thoughts are with the victims and their families," said Nick Meyer, a spokesman for NIPSCO.

Ruth Lockhart, an agent with McColly Real Estate's Crown Point office who is the property manager for the house, said the adults knew it was their responsibility to

have the gas and electricity turned back on.

"I don't know what happened there," she said.

She said the family signed a one-year lease and moved in on Saturday.

"They were very kind people. The children were very kind and well-mannered. It's very sad, very tragic," Lockhart said.

Neighbors drove by and stopped to talk after hearing of the tragedy.

"I live right behind them and watched them move in. I feel so bad," said Anna Mae Satanek, who fought back tears as she returned to her van.

Laura Smith-Wynn, founder and executive director for the Indiana Parenting Institute in Gary, met Purnell when Purnell sought her help in landing a job after she and her family moved to Indiana from Illinois.

Smith-Wynn said she had been very impressed by Purnell.

"I'd helped her with her resume, and she was very determined and very into her family," Smith-Wynn said. "She wanted to acclimate with her family here and live the best life they could."

At Chicago State, Purnell was regarded as "more than just a model employee," said Chicago State spokesman Tom Wogan.

"As assistant to the dean, she was the gear that made things run smoothly. She was well-known and well-liked, and the campus is obviously hurting over her loss," Wogan said.

"Ms. Purnell was a colleague and very dear friend to many CSU students, faculty and staff," said Chicago State President Wayne Watson in a prepared statement.

"This tragic event has touched every part of our campus community, and we join now in mourning" the family.

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