

Retiree killed in holdup

Ralph Elliott, right, is slain in Bronzeville as he picked up food he and his wife had ordered for their Christmas Eve party. An ex-con on parole for murder is charged.



By Georgia Garvey and Jeremy Gorner
TRIBUNE REPORTERS

Ralph Elliott had just finished putting up the tree on Christmas Eve, hanging his and wife Dolores' artisan ornaments with precise care. He spent an hour just searching for a missing bulb in the string of tree lights, his wife remembered.

It was typical of him, she said, to take pride in small details.

He wrapped the present that he'd sneaked out and bought her, even though they had agreed to forgo gifts this year, and volunteered to pick up food they'd ordered for the Christmas Eve party they'd hosted for more than 50 years.

Dolores Elliott, busy cooking and preparing for the 30 guests of extended family gratefully accepted the offer. She had no way of knowing the man she'd been married to for 54 years would lose his life running a simple holiday errand.

"For me, this is a destruction," she said of her husband's murder. "It's needless violence."

Police said Elliott, 79, had just picked up a large order of his favorite chicken in the Popeye's restaurant at 818 E. 47th St. in the Bronzeville neighborhood, and was loading it into his car just before 4 p.m. when a man waiting for Elliott to emerge from the restaurant tried to rob him. A scuffle ensued, said Officer Gabrielle Lesniak, a Chicago Police Department spokeswoman.

The robber shot Elliott, of the 1400 block of East 55th Street, twice, once in the face and once in the shoulder, then ran east toward Drexel Boulevard, police said. Witnesses pointed police in the direction the robber had run, Lesniak said, and officers combing the area noticed a man matching their descriptions.

They arrested the man and found a gun on him, according to police, and witnesses identified him as the man they'd seen earlier.

On Christmas, authorities filed a murder charge against Lee Craton, 48, who had been paroled a year ago after serving a prison term for murder. Craton, of the 16800 block of North Broadway Street in Joliet, faces new charges of attempted armed robbery and violating parole in addition to the murder charge.

Police said that after shooting Elliott, Craton rifled through his pockets looking for money.

But Elliott's wife said that if the man had only asked for help, her husband would have lent a hand.

"If he was hungry, (my husband) would have fed him," Dolores Elliott said. "If he needed money, he would have given it to him."

She called her husband a "gentle giant" who had "an addiction to people, and it's not a bad thing."

One of only a handful of black students in his senior class at Tilden High School on the South Side, Elliott went on to attend the University of Illinois at Chicago when it was located at Navy Pier, according to his wife.

The couple bore a long history of



"For me, this is a destruction," says Dolores Elliott of the Christmas Eve slaying of her husband, Ralph. "It's needless violence." The Elliotts had been married for 54 years. DAVID PIERINI/TRIBUNE PHOTO



Lee Craton, on parole for a 1980s murder, is accused of shooting Ralph Elliott to death in a holdup.

community work, Dolores said, she more so than her husband. But he volunteered and supported her as she conducted fundraising for the Rev. Martin Luther King and devel-

oped a 40-year career with the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition, among other nonprofit organizations.

"I was one of the young ladies back in the day that was already working and living on my own," she said of their 1954 meeting at the Illinois Department of Employment Security, where they both worked as civil servants for more than 35 years. After their marriage in 1955, Elliott moved through the ranks there, eventually becoming executive director of the branch of board of review.

He retired in 1993, three years after his wife, and focused on his family as well as beloved hobbies like playing chess and fishing.

"I was the steamer, the motivator; the chicken-gatherer; and he was the nurturer," said Dolores Elliott, 75.

The Rev. Jesse Jackson, Rainbow/PUSH founder and president, said he knew both Elliotts well from their decades of activism and volunteerism.

"(Ralph Elliott) has just never stopped serving," Jackson said. "I

can't think of a cause when both of them were not there in their separate roles."

The violent history of the man accused of killing Elliott is listed in Department of Corrections records.

In 1985, legal records show, Craton was sentenced to 28 years in prison for a murder one year earlier, an offense for which he was paroled in November of last year. According to the Corrections Department Web site, he has not yet completed that term of parole, which was scheduled to end in November of 2011. While in prison, department records say, Craton was twice convicted of attacking a peace officer, once in 2001 and again in 2005.

Craton is scheduled to appear in Bond Court Saturday.

Jackson called for justice in the crime. "This kind of behavior must be deterred. It cannot go unpunished," Jackson said. The killing "shows, really though, that in a climate of violence, none of us are safe until all of us are safe."

Ralph Elliott's wife said that, for now, she's taking refuge in their large extended family.

The couple, who did not have children, enjoyed a close relationship with their seven nieces and nephews, and two godchildren. And every year, they threw that big Christmas Eve party, with food, games and gift exchanges, Dolores Elliott said. Forbidden was all talk of "people's arthritis," she said, but everything from politics to religion was up for debate.

"It lasts until the wee hours of the morning," Dolores said of the party, to be followed by a service at their church, the Metropolitan Community Church, at 4610 S. Prairie Ave. in Chicago. "It's a night of laughing and talking and sharing."

Instead of a celebration, though, Dolores Elliott said the family gathered Thursday night to mourn. Her comforts now come in very small portions.

"When I looked at him in the hospital, his face was peaceful. And so I guess he didn't suffer," she said. So far, Dolores Elliott has not been able to sleep.

On Friday morning, the presents Ralph Elliott wrapped remained untouched under the tree, and his wife refused to unplug the lights. Coffecake sat on a plate on a tray beside her, but she hadn't broken off so much as a crumb to eat.

She said that she will not sit in judgment of the man who police said took her husband's life, adding that while she believes he should be held accountable for his actions, he and his family are suffering a loss this Christmas season, as well. She said her support network, as well as her belief in God, will see her through.

"I have to know that my faith says it's OK," she said, breaking into tears. "I'm loved, and he was loved."

Tribune reporters Andrew L. Wang and Carlos Sadovi contributed.

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Teen's latest tech project a dazzling holiday display

By Vildid Ortiz Healy
TRIBUNE REPORTER

Seventeen-year-old Zach Gebis is known in his family for his technological know-how.

When he was in fifth grade, he rewired all the lights in his parents' West Chicago home to controls on his laptop. A few years later, he hooked up video surveillance around his parents' house, allowing mom and dad to watch up to 32 different views of their property simultaneously from a TV in their bedroom.

So in early December, when Gebis called his parents to the front yard so he could unveil his latest project, they were somewhat prepared for anything.

"He came to us and said, 'Come see what I did now,'" said Laura Gebis. "He took us out to the middle of the street, and we were just like, 'Oh my God.'"

The high school junior created an elaborate holiday light display, taking every Christmas decoration in his parents' basement — deer, Santas, snowmen, a Grinch and more — and programming it all to blink in sync to holiday music, broadcast on his own low-frequency radio station, 101.3 FM.

Since the light show debuted Thanksgiving night, it's become a destination for carloads of west suburban holiday light gawkers, many of whom have left donations in a box Gebis intended to hold fliers explaining how he put the show together.

"I think it's just fun," said Gebis, a student at West Chicago Community High School. "I'm always into computers and technology, and I thought, 'Hey, why not show what I love to the world?'"

After experimenting with lights in the yard on July 4, Gebis began the process of building the light display in earnest in October, when he inexplicably began loading his parents' car at the hardware store with extension cords. He ordered a transformer off the

Internet that allows him to control lights from his computer, then taught himself how to time lights to individual beats of music, a laborious process that took about 80 hours on his keyboard. At Halloween, he debuted a smaller show, with fake gravestones and pumpkins blinking to the sounds of "Monster Mash" and the theme from "The Addams Family."

The small success of that show inspired Gebis to aim bigger and further for Christmas.

Working on his laptop after school each night, he launched a Web site, lightsofillinois.com; sent out news releases to local newspapers; and printed 600 fliers explaining how his light show uses thousands of LED lights and a mile of extension cords. The displays are set to seven songs — from "Carol of the Bells" to "Winter Wonderland" — and last for about 10 minutes. The show runs from 5 to 11 p.m. nightly until Jan. 1.

It didn't take long for the public to notice. "There's nearly always someone sitting



Zach Gebis, 17, a Junior at West Chicago Community High School, created an elaborate holiday light display at his home. SCOTT STRAZZANTE/TRIBUNE PHOTO

there watching," said Joy Rush, who lives a few houses down from Gebis' display on Timber Lane. Rush said she and her husband, Mark, have enjoyed the show every time they've driven past, but they've never met the teen behind its creation.

"In some ways, I would've been surprised if it were an adult that did it," Rush said. "I'm not sure that we realize what all the technology can do."

Gebis' parents count themselves among the parents marveling at what children can do with technology. Matt Gebis, an inspector mechanic for the CTA, and Laura Gebis, a registered nurse, said they have to call on

their son's help to even turn on a computer.

But they try their best to encourage their son, especially since they have yet to see this month's electric bill.

"He does so many things that you want to support it," said Laura Gebis. "Even today, we still wonder what's going to be next."

So far, Gebis has no official plans for what he wants to be when he grows up. He's contemplating a career in business.

He does have plans for his light display next Christmas, however.

"I'm going to double everything," he said.

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Chicago Tribune

PRINTERS ROW

Oprah,
e-books and
a boy wizard

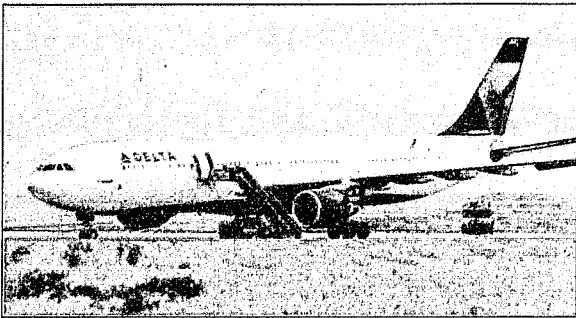
Julia Keller chronicles the
decade in literature PAGE 32



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Suspect held in jet scare



Flight 253 was isolated at Detroit Metro Airport after the incident aboard the Christmas Day flight from Amsterdam. J.P. KARAS/AP PHOTO

Officials say man tried to light incendiary device

By Sebastian Rotella
TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS

In what was described as an attempted act of terrorism, a Nigerian passenger tried to ignite an incendiary device aboard a Northwest Airlines flight from Amsterdam to Detroit on Friday as the plane began its approach for landing, federal officials said.

Other passengers overpowered the man, and the plane landed safely. The suspect, identified as Umar Farouk Abdul Mutallab, 23, suffered severe burns as a result of

his alleged attempt, and two of the other 277 passengers reported minor injuries, authorities said.

A White House official said the incident was thought to be an attempted act of terrorism.

"He was trying to ignite some kind of incendiary device," said a federal anti-terrorism official, who requested anonymity because of the sensitivity of the case. "He lit himself on fire and he's suffered some burns."

The device, which mixed power and liquid, was said to be less powerful than a bomb.

The passenger has been identified as a Nigerian who traveled from Nigeria and boarded the flight in Amsterdam, the anti-terrorism official said. It was not clear Friday whether Mutallab underwent security screening in Amsterdam or merely changed planes there.

It also was uncertain Friday night whether Mutallab had ties to a terrorist organization or had attempted the attack on his own. Despite earlier reports that he had claimed a connection to al-Qaida,

Please turn to Page 14

Saturday planner

Joffrey Ballet's "Nutcracker"

Robert Joffrey's production of Tchaikovsky's "The Nutcracker" features a full Joffrey ensemble, children's choruses and dancers.
When: 2 p.m. (also Sunday)
Where: Auditorium Theatre, 50 E. Congress Parkway
Price: \$30-\$115; 800-745-3000, ticketmaster.com

Malcolm X College Kwanzaa observance

With the theme "Honoring Our Elders for Preserving Our Cultural Heritage," an extensive program for the Kwanzaa holiday includes the African Marketplace, music, dance and theater performances, fashion shows and more; malcolmx.ccc.edu
When: Noon-4 p.m. (also 2-6 p.m. Sunday)
Where: Malcolm X College, 1900 W. Van Buren St.
Price: Free admission

Chicago French Market

The year-round European-style market offers seasonal and certified organic produce, fish, breads, pastries, flowers, prepared meals, wine and more.
When: 8:30 a.m.-6 p.m.
Where: MetraMarket, 131 N. Clinton St.
Price: Free admission; 312-575-0306, frenchmarket.chicago.com

Chicago Bulls vs. New Orleans Hornets

A 35-point lead. OK, moving on ... to a Hornets team also struggling to gain momentum after starting off sluggish, and restructuring after an early-season coaching change.
When: 7 p.m.
Where: United Center, 1901 W. Madison St.
Price: \$10-\$145; 800-745-3000, ticketmaster.com

The Rink at Wrigley

Grab your skates, and head to the parking lot next to the Friendly Lines that has been transformed into an ice skating rink.
When: 10 a.m.-11 p.m. (also 10 a.m.-8 p.m. Sunday)
Where: Wrigley Field parking lot, Clark and Addison streets
Price: \$10, \$6 for children, skate rental available; rinkatwrigley.com

—Regina Robinson

Weekend weather

SATURDAY
High 27
Low 18

SUNDAY
High 29
Low 18

Tom Skilling's complete forecast on the back of SPORTS

Pet pipeline is a ride to hope



A beagle heads for a new future after Illinois Animal Rescue transported dogs and cats from downstate to Joliet. ANTONIO PEREZ/TRIBUNE PHOTOS

Rescued dogs, cats from downstate Illinois are brought to Chicago area, where their adoption chances are better

By John Kellman
TRIBUNE REPORTER

Gordo and Goblin, sweet-tempered pit bull mixes, were not long for this world when Candy Thomas met them in a downstate pound.

The puppies had been corralled by animal control, and their owner, unable to afford the \$50 impound fee, decided to relinquish them. But Thomas, who runs a rescue operation near Carbondale, thought they had a good shot at finding a home — one that would be hundreds of miles away.

That's how the dogs ended up in a van headed north this week, two

of the latest passengers in a pipeline that transports animals from southern Illinois, or even from other states, in the hope they'll find a better future in the subdivisions and condo towers of greater Chicago.

A change of scenery does not guarantee success: Most of the animals end up in shelters, albeit no-kill ones, which then must try to arrange adoptions.

But advocates across the state say the animals' chances are far better here than in rural areas, where depressed incomes and an overwhelming abundance of dogs and cats make happy endings rare.

"Those are the lucky ones who get on that van," said Sally Matay of Illinois Animal Rescue, which brings up 60 or so animals every week. "The majority get adopted very quickly. Just given the chance for a good home, they get one."

Nationally, the Best Friends Animal Society began transporting small-breed dogs from Los Angeles shelters to other states two years ago, after finding other areas "that have not only a shortage of small dogs for adoption, but waiting lists for them," said Elizabeth Oreck, Los Angeles programs manager.

Please turn to Page 2



Julie Marry-Falkenberry of Illinois Animal Rescue warms a puppy that will be placed in a no-kill shelter and put up for adoption.

NATION & WORLD

Kidnapped soldier shown in new video

Pfc. Bowe Bergdahl, in a 36-minute video released by the Taliban and denounced by U.S. military officials as coerced, says American forces should pull out of Afghanistan. Bergdahl had not been heard from since July 19, nearly three weeks after he was captured. His family released a statement asking that Bergdahl be released, adding: "We love you and we believe in you. Stay strong." PAGE 14



DAVID PIERINI/TRIBUNE PHOTO

CHICAGOLAND

79-year-old slain in Bronzeville

Retired Illinois Department of Employment Security exec Ralph Elliott is slain in a robbery as he picked up food he and his wife had ordered for their Christmas Eve party. "For me, this is a destruction," said his wife of 54 years, Dolores, left. Lee Craton, an ex-convict on parole for a 1980s murder, has been charged with murder in the case. Police said that after shooting Elliott, Craton rifled through his pockets looking for money. PAGE 4

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