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Wednesday, May 11, 2005

Scientist Fired in Missing Disks Case Is Dead

By Allison Majure
For the Journal

Former Los Alamos National Laboratory scientist Todd Kauppila, 41, who was fired last year in a security scandal that shut the lab down for several weeks, died at Los Alamos Medical Center on Sunday.

Kauppila, formerly an experimentalist and team leader at the lab's DX Division, was fired in September over the apparent loss of two classified computer disks that were later found to have been nonexistent. An inventory error eventually was blamed.

Kauppila died of "hemorrhagic pancreatitis," Scott Wilson, associate director of the state Office of the Medical Investigator, said Tuesday.

On Friday, Kauppila had publicly rejoiced over the resignation of lab director Pete Nanos, the man who fired him.

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"Every table is packed and the beer is flowing," he told The Associated Press as he celebrated with fellow scientists at a Los Alamos eatery.

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Kauppila's wife, Sara, told neighbors that he stayed in bed Sunday, feeling dehydrated. Sunday evening she discovered him unconscious.

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Kauppila said he was fired last year because he didn't immediately return from a family vacation during a lab investigation into the two classified computer disks. Kauppila claimed he was made a scapegoat over the disks.

In a March interview, Kauppila described frustration that the University of California was dragging its feet in dealing with his contesting his firing.

Kauppila was without life insurance following the firing. Although he began contract work for Keystone International on Jan. 20, the contract position did not carry benefits.

"We are all waiting to do what we can to help the children and Sara in what ever way we can," said Judy McKenzie, a teacher at Barranca Mesa elementary school, where the Kauppilas' daughter Tia attends classes. "The students are wanting to help too and they want Tia to come back."

Neighbor and friend Jane Clements has coordinated local support for the Kauppilas. Boy Scouts, the Beta Sigma Phi Sorority and the Barranca Parent Teacher organization will be providing meals.

"There has been a tremendous outpouring of support from many, many people to provide meals, childcare and other support," Clements said.

LANL spokesman Jim Fallin said, "We want to offer our sincerest condolences and sympathies to Todd's wife and children. During his tenure Todd was a friend and colleague to many."

"Todd was an enigmatic guy and a brilliant scientist," said former LANL co-worker Scott Watson.

University Professional and Technical Employees union steward Betty Ann Gunther said, "I admired Todd deeply for his courage in such a difficult position and for his ability to be good to people ... No one would have suspected him of being, in any way, a poor performer. He was outstanding and

his friends will tell you that."

Contributions to the Kauppila family can be made payable to "Memorial Fund for Todd Kauppila" Account 322687-20, Los Alamos National Bank, P.O. Box 60, Los Alamos, N.M. 87544. For more information, contact Jane Clements, 661-6570.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.



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