

Home elevator becomes death trap for elderly Ga. couple stuck inside

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When the elevator in their home got stuck between floors, Sherwood and Caroline Wadsworth found themselves trapped with no way to call for help as temperatures rose into the 90s in the closet-sized lift until they finally died from heat exhaustion.

Autopsies on the elderly couple — he was 90, she was 89 — on Thursday pointed to a tragic end to lives they shared for more than 60 years. Police estimated they had been dead at least four days before a newspaper carrier called 911 out of concern that papers had piled up by their garage.

Investigators were trying to determine what turned an elevator into a death trap inside the Wadsworths' three-story home overlooking Georgia's coastal marshes. Stunned family members, meanwhile, looked for a shred of solace.

"We always said we hoped they would go together because if one went, the other wouldn't survive long," the couple's son, Wesley Wadsworth of Blue Bell, Penn., said Thursday. "They were so dependent on each other."

The newspaper carrier called police Wednesday after noticing the unopened editions going back to July 9, as well as an untouched watermelon a neighbor had left at the couple's door the day before.

Police had to break into the house because the doors were locked and bolted. Inside they found no one but the Wadsworths' cat. Then they noticed the elevator — accessed by what looked like closet doors with up-and-down arrow buttons in the walls. Once the shaft was open, they found the elevator stuck between the home's second and third floor.

Police discovered the Wadsworths' bodies lying in a fetal position, facing each other, Glynn County coroner Jimmy Durden said Thursday. Autopsies concluded both died from heat exhaustion. Durden estimated temperatures in the elevator reached 95 degrees.

There was no phone in the elevator, leaving the couple unable to call for help, said Glynn County Police Chief Matt Doering.

"It's just tragic," Doering said. "We all know one day we're going to die. This is one of those horrible ones where you're stuck somewhere."

Though they were from Pennsylvania, the Wadsworths had been vacationing on the Georgia coast most of their lives. They'd met while attending Ursinus College in the 1940s, not long before Sherwood Wadsworth went overseas to fight in World War II as a bomber pilot.

Caroline Wadsworth was the daughter of prosperous car dealer. When her husband returned from the war, their son said, he started two dealerships of his own in the Philadelphia area before retiring to the Georgia coast in the early 1980s.

They stayed as active as their health would allow. Until he needed a cane, Sherwood would walk three miles on the beach every day. Twice a week, they'd head to a resort on neighboring Sea Island for cocktails and dancing to big band music.

"My father-in-law dressed in a dinner jacket or tux, and my mother-in-law always wore a long dress — dressed to the nines," said Maureen Wadsworth, their son's wife. "They were great people, fun people."

As the years passed and age took hold, the couple went out less often. But they maintained their independence and took care of each other.

Sherwood, known as Waddy to his friends, would get up every morning to fetch the newspaper and make breakfast for his wife. He'd send it up to her in the elevator so she could eat in bed and work on the crossword puzzle, his son said.

Likewise, whenever the couple ventured out, Caroline would wrap an arm around her husband's for extra support as he walked with his cane.

"My mother-in-law's arm was always slipped in his," Maureen Wadsworth said. "They always walked hand-in-hand."

In the past week, neighbor Phoebe Hoaster had a growing sense that something wasn't quite right. She noticed newspapers gathering outside the couple's garage when she left a watermelon at their door Tuesday before the couple was found.

Hoaster, who lives next door to the Wadsworths' house along a narrow private with marsh grasses growing on one side, says she also noticed Sherwood didn't take out the trash on Sunday as he normally did. That didn't seem too unusual, she says, considering the sweltering July weather.

"I thought, 'Well, it's hot and maybe they're just not getting out,'" she said.

Doering, the police chief, said it's still unclear precisely when the Wadsworths became trapped in the elevator. And the autopsies were unable to determine exactly how long the couple had been dead. But Doering said investigators are confident the couple died at least four days before their bodies were found.

Inspectors at Georgia's Department of Labor are also investigating to determine whether the elevator was licensed when it was installed, department spokesman Sam Hall said. The probe could take several weeks.

Annual inspections aren't required for elevators in private homes, unlike those in public or commercial buildings. Hall didn't have technical details about the couple's elevator, but said all elevators in Georgia are required to have a landline phone so users can call for help.

"It's the responsibility of the owner of the elevator to make sure the maintenance is done properly," Hall said.

Wesley Wadsworth, who last visited his parents to celebrate his father's 90th birthday in February, said they had complained of mechanical problems with the elevator in April and May.

Still, no one suspected the device that had seemed such a boon to his parents in their old age would become a death trap.

"We were prepared for them to die," the couple's son said. "But not that way."