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Expert Killed in Gun-Lab Accident

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WEST VALLEY CITY -- A renowned forensic investigator died late Thursday after a rifle he was examining discharged, shooting him in the chest.

Scott R. Spjut, director of the police department's Forensic Services Unit, was looking for fingerprints on the semiautomatic weapon around 4 p.m. when it fired, said West Valley City Assistant Police Chief Craig Gibson. Police were still investigating how the gun went off.

The accident occurred in the crime lab in the basement of West Valley City Hall. Spjut, 38, was in the room by himself. A forensic investigator, a police detective and four evidence room employees were in the vicinity and heard the shot.

They provided medical aid to Spjut until he was airlifted to University Hospital.

"He was breathing when transported," said Tammy Kikuchi, city spokeswoman. Spjut underwent multiple emergency surgeries throughout the evening, while his wife, other members of his family and more than 20 police officers waited in the hospital. The doctors informed them that Spjut died from his injuries just after 10:30 p.m.

West Valley City created its forensic unit five years ago. Spjut supervised four investigators and almost daily searched firearms for fingerprints. He had at least five years of experience with West Valley City and prior experience with other forensic units, Gibson said.

"He has handled hundreds, maybe thousands, of guns," he said.

Spjut was an expert in fingerprinting who taught at a conference for the International Association for Identification in December.

"He is one of those who always gives you a little bit more than you expect," said Capt. Craig Black. "He is very serious about the integrity of his job."

At City Hall, Gibson said employees were greatly affected by the accident.

"This is a member of our family," he said. "This is really tough."

Forensic investigator Kent Timothy was at home when he heard of the shooting. He said it is highly unusual that any loaded gun would be in the forensic laboratory.

"They are all supposed to be checked before they even get entered," he said.

Investigators are not sure why the gun was loaded, who placed it in the evidence room or what crime it was connected to, Gibson said.

West Valley City officers will jointly investigate the accident with Salt Lake County sheriff's deputies.

The city also invited the Salt Lake County District Attorney's Office to assist, Gibson said.

West Jordan police will help West Valley City with any forensic work it needs completed while its lab is closed.

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