

East Palo Alto upbeat amid tearful memories

By Lisa Millegan
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MENLO PARK — More than 1,200 people, including several city and school dignitaries, packed Menlo Park's First Presbyterian Church on Thursday to remember seven of the nine people who died in April 26's tragic East Palo Alto house fire.

For three hours, mourners shared memories of the victims as gospel songs performed by soloists and the New Sweet Home Fellowship Hall children's choir filled the church.

Although many tears were shed, the mood was surprisingly upbeat

as preachers reminded the congregation that their loved ones were with God. Throughout the service, mourners punctuated speeches with shouts of "Amen!" and applause. And several stood up from their seats during the funeral to cheer on the singers or praise the Lord.

"All that could be done was done," said Charlie Mae Knight, superintendent of Ravenswood City School District. "The less of this cold world, the more heaven."

The service closed with

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A member of one victim's family tries to wipe away tears before entering the Menlo Park Presbyterian Church.

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Victims: All were loved, missed

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mourners filing past the open caskets of the dead: Bonnie McKean Thompson, 41; her daughter Keneta Latashay Rivers, 20; Keneta's cousin Sonya Renee McNack-Blue, 23; Sonya's daughter Ja'meace Antoinette Mosley, 4; Ja'meace's cousin Donta Dorracle Price, 11; Donta's sister Angelika Renee Rahiman, 7, and Darcy Darwin Dixon Jr., 5, also known as "D.J."

The two other victims, Anthony Taylor, 10, and Bonnie's sister, Alma Campbell, 59, were remembered at separate funerals earlier this week.

Relatives of the dead filled about 15 pews in the front of the church. Fire survivor and family matriarch Verna McKean, 78, was wheeled in at the start of the service, wearing a white suit and accompanied by four young men dressed in tuxedos. McKean, whose arm was bandaged, remained in her wheelchair throughout the funeral and did not speak to the audience.

Representatives from the Palo Alto and Menlo Park Fire Departments and East Palo Alto city government attended the funeral. East Palo Alto Mayor R.B. Jones was a featured speaker and East Palo Alto City Manager Jerry Groomes stood in line with other mourners to view the bodies of the dead. Mourners filled the church to capacity, forcing some to wait outside.

A family friend who identified herself only as "Sundance" eulogized most of the victims, saying that all the relatives were loved and will be missed.

Thompson, she said, was a wonderful cook who was always busy. She was a mother and best friend to everyone. Thompson was full of joy and loved her daughter Keneta dearly.

Rivers was "cool" and loved to braid hair, Sundance said. Rivers also loved children and always wanted to babysit her cousins.

McNack was full of life and was often the loudest person in the family, Sundance said. Although kind and gentle, she was a fierce protector of her family and loved her 4-year-old daughter Ja'meace deeply.



GEORGE WOLF — Staff

A woman overcome with grief collapses outside First Park Presbyterian Church in Menlo Park. More than 1,200 people mourned for fire victims Thursday.

Ja'meace was bigger than life and "had a way of telling it like it was," she said. Her favorite song was, "My name's Ja'meace and I love the Lord."

Donta is probably up in heaven riding a bike, Sundance said. He loved popping wheelies and could perform almost any stunt. He also liked money and would check bills carefully to make sure he wasn't overcharged. His sister Angelika was "everybody's angel" and enjoyed singing and dancing.

"She was an amazing creature and just a blessing to have around," Sundance said.

Dixon had just moved to East

Palo Alto from Fresno and loved to ride bikes with his brothers, sisters and cousins. He was a Power Rangers fanatic and always walked around with his basket of crayons and a coloring book.

Minister Excel Lacy said he met the McKean family in 1975 and was immediately impressed with them.

"I said, 'Mom, there's a big family down the street and they have more kids than we do,'" he said, adding that Verna McKean was a wonderful mother who was caring to everyone she came in contact with.

"To me, she is the commu-

nity's mother," he said.

Mourners each received programs for the funeral that showed pictures and short biographies of each victim. Near the end of the funeral, organizers flashed photos of the victims on the TV while a soloist sang a gospel song.

Throughout the service, speakers reminded family members that they are loved and that the rest of East Palo Alto and the Peninsula supports them.

"Our city will remain in mourning with you until there's an answer from heaven," Jones said.