Joanne Roberts, 58, Frank Porter Graham researcher, dies at home

BY ERIC FERRERI
STAFF WRITER

CHAPEL HILL — Joanne Erwich Roberts, a longtime researcher at UNC's Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, has died.

Roberts was 58. She died Saturday morning at her home and was found by her husband, Barry Roberts, a professor at UNC's Kenan-Flagler Business School. The details of her death weren't clear. Chapel Hill police originally described the death as "suspicious," but Chapel Hill Police Capt. Chris Blue said Monday that is a designation given to "unattended" deaths. Nobody else was present when Roberts died, Blue said.

At UNC, she was a professor of speech and hearing sciences and a research professor of pediatrics. She spent much of her career studying language development, particularly as it pertained to young African-American men and to people with Fragile X Syndrome, a cause of mental retardation.

She started at the child development institute in 1981 as a postdoctoral fellow and three years later became a researcher there, said Sam Odom, the institute's current director. She has published more than 125 scholarly articles.

"She was just very prominent within the field," Odom said. "It is a blow to the profession."

At one time a speech pathologist, Roberts also worked and published extensively in the field of otitis media — ear infections affecting young children.

"Her early work had implications for children and child care centers and for how language develops," Odom said.

Roberts received a great deal of grant funding to support her work, Odom said. Major contributors included the National Science Foundation, Fragile X Foundation, March of Dimes and National Institutes of Health.

A native of New York City, Roberts received her doctorate from Indiana University in speech pathology and audiology. She and her husband were married for more than 37 years and have two sons, Justin and Matthew. Justin works with TA Associates, a private equity firm in Boston, and Matthew is an investment bank analyst with Bank of America in Charlotte.

The family has asked that, in lieu of flowers, memorials be made to the MS Society of Eastern North Carolina, in memory of Joanne Roberts.

eric.ferreri@newsobserver.com
or 919-932-2008.
GUC crew responds after gas line struck, dormitory evacuated

The Daily Reflector

An East Carolina University dorm was evacuated briefly this afternoon because of a gas leak.

A construction crew working on 14th Street hit a gas line just before 3:30 p.m., a GUC dispatcher said.

Greenville Fire-Rescue and Greenville Utilities Commission workers responded to the scene and the gas was turned off by 3:46 p.m., the dispatcher said.

ECU Police evacuated the occupants of nearby Belk Residence Hall but students were allowed back in the building less than half an hour later, according to an ECU spokesperson.

The ECU News Bureau was informed the gas line in question was a house connection.

Fourteenth Street remained blocked off from Rocksprings Road to West Berkley Road, near Dowdy-Ficklen Stadium.