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## Walnut Creek couple dies in Utah flash flood

By **John Simerman**  
**Contra Costa Times**

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Before they left last week for the Utah wilderness, Kathy and Gordon Chapple spoke eagerly about the outdoor adventure they had planned with their adult son and daughter-in-law. They would ride on horseback, hike and, in a highlight, climb by rope down into a slot canyon.

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"We kind of joked," said Cathy Butler, a close friend and neighbor of the 60-year-old couple, who had made similar trips to Utah in the past. "She said, 'It's not going to kill me.' Something like that."

But no one could anticipate the flash flood that would rip through the narrow, steep canyon in the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, drowning the couple about 2:30 p.m. Wednesday afternoon, according to Garfield County spokeswoman Becki Bronson.

The Chapples and their children had been hiking in a group of eight with a pair of guides about 140 miles south of Salt Lake City. Fast-moving thunderstorms had passed above the Egypt Trailhead area about 12:30 p.m. Wednesday, dropping up to a half-inch of rain, said Randy Graham, a National Weather Service meteorologist.

The group was quickly engulfed in water. The others were able to "eddy" out by clinging to the canyon walls, Bronson said.

"Literally, it was a matter of minutes from the time it started raining to the time it began to flood," she said.

One survivor hiked out and called 911 at 5:30 p.m., Garfield County Sheriff Dan Perkins told the Salt Lake Tribune. Around 7 p.m. Wednesday, a deputy

and one of the guides flew back to the canyon in a helicopter and found the bodies downstream, where the flood waters had pooled.

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Stunned friends and colleagues described Gordon Chapple as a warm man, an effective business leader with many companies — many of them in the food industry — who also loved nature. An avid

photographer with a darkroom in his garage, he loved flyfishing, had studied snakes and often rid neighbors' yards of them with ease, neighbors said

"We'd have rattlesnakes in the yard. He'd grab them and throw them in a bucket," said neighbor Bob Butler. "He just knew what to do."

Gordon Chapple also had undergone surgery last year on a shoulder he injured while flyfishing, said neighbors in tight-knit Joaquin Ranch, which runs along Shell Ridge Open Space.

Kathy Chapple was active as a parent and teacher at local schools and for years helped teach in gifted and talented elementary school programs. She frequently trekked through the open space behind their home, and on Mount Diablo. She loved animals, and last year adopted a mustang.

"Kathy said, 'I could spend my whole day in a barn,' that's how much she loved animals," said Lisa Sieve, who with husband Randy were friends with the couple, who met as students at UC Santa Barbara. "This is just such a loss for us."

Randy Sieve, a former colleague of Gordon, said they were doing what they loved when they died.

"He was very passionate about his hobbies — photography, hiking, the outdoors — he was very environmentally conscious," said Sieve, one of the operating officers with Gordon Chapple of nSpired Natural Foods, which operated in San Leandro from 2000 until earlier this year, when the company was bought by the Hain Celestial Group, a specialty food company.

Gordon Chapple had been an accomplished nature photographer since the 1970s, and starting about 1990 began making gallery-quality "carbon transfer prints," in both black-and-white and color. Examples can be seen at the Web site [www.gordonchapple.com](http://www.gordonchapple.com).

Perkins noted that even experienced hikers can be caught by flash floods in canyons such as this.

"They weren't doing it for the danger. They were doing it for the beauty and scenery," said Bob Butler. "They were prepared. They got caught."

Lindsay Whitehurst and Mark Havnes of the Salt Lake Tribune and Times staff writer Sam Richards and contributed to this report.

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