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FEATURED

Suit in New Mexico alleges medical negligence in death of 'Star Trek' actor

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Nichelle Nichols, who played Lt. Nyota Uhura on “Star Trek,” waves as she arrives at the “Star Trek: 30 Years and Beyond?” tribute at Paramount Studios in Los Angeles on Oct. 6, 1996.

Damian Dovarganes/Associated Press

Headlines around the world heralded the 2022 death in Silver City of Nichelle Nichols, who broke barriers for Black women in Hollywood with her portrayal of Lt. Uhura on the original “Star Trek” television series.

But a lawsuit quietly playing out in Grant County has revealed disturbing details about the 89-year-old actor’s death, which her family says lacked the dignity she deserved.

The suit alleges that employees at Gila Regional Medical Center failed to appropriately diagnose and treat Nichols for symptoms of acute heart failure. The regional hospital instead sent Nichols home to an assisted living center, where she died hours later on July 30, 2022.

“I don’t think that they provided a quality of care up to an appropriate standard,” Nichols’ son, Kyle Johnson, said Wednesday in a phone interview. “I think that my mother’s passing was due to their mishandling of her, and this all occurred in a very short period of time, literally overnight.”

Nichols was featured in 67 of the 78 episodes of the original “Star Trek,” which aired from 1966 to 1969. She portrayed the smart, professional Lt. Nyota Uhura on the bridge of the starship Enterprise. She and other cast members also appeared in six big-screen spinoffs from 1979 to 1991.

Officials at Gila Regional Medical Center did not immediately respond to requests for comment this week. GRMC’s attorney, Ryan Clement of Houston, did not respond to emails seeking comment.

The suit alleges that Nichols was admitted to GRMC the day before her death with a diagnosis of acute heart failure based on imaging and lab results.

Nichols was transferred to the hospital from Millie's Assisted Living Center in Silver City with the expectation that she would be admitted to inpatient care, the suit alleges.

But the hospital "failed to secure a hospital bed for Ms. Nichols upon admission and then failed to transfer her to a facility that had an available bed," the suit alleges.

The family's attorney, Lisa Curtis, said Nichols was placed overnight in an observation bed, which is essentially a halfway point between the emergency department and inpatient admission.

"They just put her on an observation bed overnight and she got worse," Curtis said. "Nobody diagnosed what was wrong with her because they didn't do a cardiac workup. They sent her home and she died in seven hours."

Nichols died at Millie's Assisted Living Center the day of her discharge, the suit said. Emergency responders were dispatched to the facility about 7:50 p.m. but were unable to save her, the suit said.

GRMC "knew or should have known that Millie's Assisted Living Center lacked the appropriate resources to monitor and care for a patient in Ms. Nichols' condition," the suit alleges.

"She died on the floor at Millie's," Curtis said. "It's just a very undignified way of dying."

A trial in the case scheduled in June was canceled after wildfires and evacuations in Grant County hindered jury selection, Curtis said. The 6th Judicial District Court trial is now set for June 2026 before Judge Jim Foy. The suit seeks

unspecified compensatory and punitive damages.

Johnson said he refrained from telling hospital personnel that his mother was a famous actress to help ensure she received priority care.

“No, I didn’t,” he said. “It shouldn’t be an entitlement for people who are celebrities or icons or world famous. It should happen for anybody who walks through the door.”

Johnson said he invited his mother to move from Los Angeles to his home near Silver City in the final years of her life. Nichols lived at Johnson’s home until a short time before her death, he said.

Nichols, a successful stage and screen actor, was among the first Black women to hold a leading role in a network television series.

A November 1968 episode featured a kiss between Nichol’s character and Capt. James Kirk, played by white actor William Shatner, which was widely considered the first interracial kiss in television history, although the claim is disputed.

The episode, “Plato’s Stepchildren,” aired just one year after the U.S. Supreme Court struck down a Virginia law banning interracial marriage.

Near the end of the first season of “Star Trek,” Nichols decided to leave the series to take a role on Broadway. Nichols changed her mind at the request of Martin Luther King Jr., who called Nichols a “vital role model” for African Americans seeking acceptance in mainstream society, she recalled in an interview.

Johnson said he also wants his mother remembered for her work with NASA. Nichols travelled to college campuses across the country to recruit minority and female candidates for the U.S. space program. Among her recruits was Sally Ride, the first American woman in space.

“Previously, it was all about Navy test pilots that were the astronauts,” he said.

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