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### **Student who hacked Sarah Palin's emails during 2008 campaign dies**

University of Tennessee-Knoxville student guessed his way into Republican vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin's personal email account .



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# Student who hacked Sarah Palin's emails during 2008 campaign dies

[Ryan Poe](#), USA TODAY NETWORK – Tennessee Published 8:11 p.m. ET Feb. 8, 2018 | Updated 1:17 p.m. ET Feb. 9, 2018

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The college student who hacked into the email account of then-Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin in the 2008 election has died. Buzz60



Knoxville attorney Wade Davies, left, and his client David Christopher Kernell leave the federal court house in Knoxville on Nov. 12, 2010. (Photo: Knoxville News Sentinel)

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MEMPHIS — David Kernell, the University of Tennessee-Knoxville student who [guessed his way](#) into Republican vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin's personal email account in 2008, died last week in California. He was 30.

Kernell, son of Shelby County Schools board member and former Democratic state representative Mike Kernell, died of complications related to progressive multiple sclerosis (MS) late Friday or early Saturday, his family confirmed in a statement Thursday.

David Kernell, once ranked in the top 10% of chess players in the U.S., was a 20-year-old economics major at UT when he guessed the security answers to enter Palin's Yahoo! account, changed the password to "popcorn," and then posted the new password, family photographs and some emails on the online message board 4chan under the pseudonym "Rubico."

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Kernell, who read that Palin may have conducted official business as governor of Alaska on her personal account, failed to find politically damaging information about Palin, who was Sen. John McCain's running mate at the time of the hacking.

The case earned the younger Kernell searing criticism from Palin and her fans, with Palin comparing the hacking to Watergate, the 1972 break-in at the Democratic National Committee that gradually led to President Richard Nixon's resignation. At the trial, Palin described the hacking as "the most disruptive and discouraging" moment of the campaign.



Republican presidential candidate Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., and his running mate, former Alaska governor Sarah Palin, wave to the crowd at the end of her speech at the Republican National Convention in St. Paul, Minn., on Sept. 3, 2008. (Photo: Paul Sancya, AP)

But federal jurors and a judge took a softer view of the infiltration. In 2010, after all but one of the felony charges were dropped, he served 10 months in a minimum-security prison for obstruction of justice after destroying evidence from his computer. He also was convicted of a misdemeanor for illegally accessing Palin's email. Between all the charges, Kernell had faced a maximum of five years in prison, a \$250,000 fine and three years probation.

After exiting prison in 2011, Kernell was released from U.S. Probation Office supervision in 2013.

In a page-long statement regarding his death, the family said Kernell was diagnosed with MS in 2014 and participated in clinical research trials at the Cedars-Sinai Neurosciences Research Center in Los Angeles to help develop cures and treatments for other victims of MS.

"David did not let (the Palin) incident define him," the family said. "He returned to UT Knoxville to complete his economics degree and further refined his programming skills by helping his local community. He first volunteered his expertise to Tennessee Voices for Children, a child advocacy non-profit group. Later, he moved to California and worked to develop facial recognition software that could identify children at risk of abuse."

Wade Davies, a Knoxville attorney who represented Kernell in the case, declined to comment, saying he wanted to speak to Kernell's mother first. Davies argued during the trial that what Kernell did was closer to a prank — and one that wouldn't have been prosecuted as zealously if the victim hadn't been a rising Republican star.

"For a brief period of time he was the most famous chess player in the country."

Allan Bogle, radio host

Allan Bogle, host of the program *Into the Deep* on radio station WEVL-FM, said he knew Kernell through the Memphis Chess Club and that he grew up to be a "very smart guy." Bogle said Kernell used the same "Rubico" pseudonym to post Palin's information on 4chan as he used to play Bogle in online chess.

"For a brief period of time he was the most famous chess player in the country," Bogle said of the coverage of the Palin scandal.

Before stepping into the national spotlight, Kernell graduated in 2006 from Germantown High School in the Memphis suburb of Germantown, where two years earlier he won the Tennessee Open Scholastic Chess Championship.

Besides chess, Kernell enjoyed spearfishing, free diving, rock climbing, and wilderness exploration and online gaming, the statement reads.

Rep. Jim Coley, Barlett Republican and family friend, said David was a good man, like his father and grandfather, Sam Kernell, who fought in both World War II and the Korean War.

"David picked up his good virtues from his father and his grandfather," Coley said. "I was very sorry to learn about David's death."

Services are being planned in Newport Beach, Calif., and in Germantown. Endowments in David's honor are being set up at the Memphis Chess Club, Cedars-Sinai Neurosciences Research Center, and the Tennessee Voices for Children.

*Contributing: Jamie Satterfield, Knoxville (Tenn.) News Sentinel. Follow Ryan Poe on Twitter: @ryanpoe*

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Sarah Palin through the years

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Donald Trump is joined on stage by Palin during a campaign event in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, on Feb. 1, 2016. Mary Altaffer, AP

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Palin endorses Trump during a rally at Iowa State University on Jan. 19, 2016, in Ames, Iowa. Mary Altaffer, AP

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Palin watches from the audience during the Republican presidential debate in Las Vegas on Dec. 15, 2015. Ruth Fremson, Pool/European Pressphoto Agency

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Palin speaks at the Conservative Political Action Conference on Feb. 26, 2015, in National Harbor, Md. H. Darr Beiser, USAT

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Palin waves as she leaves the stage during the Conservative Political Action Conference on March 8, 2014, in National Harbor, Md. T.J. Kirkpatrick, Getty Images

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Palin speaks at the Conservative Political Action Conference on March 16, 2013, in National Harbor, Md. Pete Marovich, Getty Images

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Palin holds a newspaper as she co-hosts NBC's "Today" show in New York on April 3, 2012. Peter Kramer, AP

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Palin waves to the crowd as she arrives for the Tea Party's "Restoring America" event on Sept. 3, 2011, in Indianola, Iowa. Scott Olson, Getty Images

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Palin rides on a motorcycle before participating in the Rolling Thunder rally on May 29, 2011, in Arlington, Va. Chip Somodevilla, Getty Images

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Palin signs a copy of her book "America by Heart" at the Andover Dillons Marketplace in Andover, Kan., on Nov. 28, 2010. Jaime Green, AP

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Palin campaigns for U.S. Senate candidate John Raese as his wife, Liz, applauds, on Oct. 30, 2010, in Wheeling, W.Va. Scott McCloskey, AP

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Sarah Palin addresses the crowd during a stop of the Tea Party Express on April 14, 2010, in Boston. Charles Krupa, AP

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Palin waves to a rally crowd in Minneapolis with Michele Bachmann on April 7, 2010. Jim Mone, AP

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Palin speaks during a campaign rally for Texas Gov. Rick Perry on Feb. 7, 2010, in Cypress, Texas. Dave Einsel, Getty Images

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Palin interacts with a customer during a book-signing event in Henrietta, N.Y., on Nov. 21, 2009. Don Heupel, AP

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Palin announces on July 3, 2009, in Wasilla, Alaska, that she is stepping down from her position as Alaska governor later that month. Robert DeBerry, AP

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Palin responds to questions during a news conference in Juneau, Alaska, on Feb. 11, 2009. Chris Miller, AP

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Sen. John McCain hugs Palin after his concession speech in Phoenix on Nov. 4, 2008. Michael Chow, The Arizona Republic

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Palin votes on Nov. 4, 2008, at Wasilla City Hall in Wasilla, Alaska. Ted S. Warren, AP

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Palin speaks at a campaign rally on Oct. 4, 2008, in Carson, Calif. David McNew, Getty Images

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Palin greets Joe Biden on stage for their vice presidential debate on Oct. 2, 2008, at Washington University in St. Louis. PAUL J. RICHARDS, AFP/Getty Images

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Palin addresses the delegates at the Republican National Convention in St. Paul, Minn., on Sept. 3, 2008. Robert Deutsch, USAT

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McCain stands with Palin at a campaign rally on Aug. 29, 2008, in Dayton, Ohio, after she was announced as his running mate. Mario Tama, Getty Images

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Palin is sworn in as governor of Alaska as her husband, Todd Palin, holds the Bible during an inauguration ceremony in Fairbanks, Alaska, on Dec. 4, 2006. Al Grillo, AP

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Palin passes out hand warmers to a supporter who braved the cold to wave campaign signs in Anchorage, Alaska, on Nov. 4, 2006, during her gubernatorial campaign. AP

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This October 1996 photo shows Palin in her office when she was serving as mayor of Wasilla, Alaska. AP

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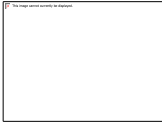
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