



A death to care about

April 22, 2015

HASSANATU WULU chose to ogle jewelry rather than to hold Christina Sankey's hand, the way she should have. And when she realized Christina was in trouble, she waited to call police for help.

Then she lied about it. And then Christina died. It's that simple. And that devastating.

Yesterday, a grand jury recommended that Wulu be charged with reckless endangerment and felony neglect in Christina's death on March 7, 2014.

The grand jury's presentment obviously won't bring Christina back to her relatives, who ache with grief for her. But I hope to hell it serves as a warning to the people who are hired to look after the most vulnerable among us:

These lives matter. And if they come to harm on your watch, you'll be held accountable.

Readers might remember Christina, whose death I wrote about last year. She was 37, severely autistic and intellectually disabled. She was unable to speak, had the mental capacity of a toddler and could not be left alone. She lived in Point Breeze with her mother, Patricia Sankey, and her sister, Liza, who is 35 and also intellectually disabled.

"We were the Three Musketeers," Sankey says wistfully. "We were close. If Christina was supposed to be my cross to bear, I bore it gratefully. She was not going to set the world on fire. But she was my world."

Christina received home and companion care from Wulu, 30, a statepaid caregiver employed by an agency called Casmir Care Services. Wulu played with Christina or took her on simple outings. But her most important job was to keep her safe.

That meant keeping her in sight at all times, because she would take off on her own elope, as caregivers call it at any moment.

"Christina should be monitored closely while she's out in the community," read the individual support plan for Christina. "If possible, her hand should be held to ensure she's not able to run away. She must be physically escorted across the street. She's unaware of dangers associated with traffic. While inside of buildings, Christina should be kept in direct line of sight to ensure she does not elope."

Wulu knew this. She'd been Christina's caregiver for four years, annually reviewed Christina's plan and was even admonished in 2012 for leaving Christina without supervision for 10 minutes at a day program.

She chucked it all aside the afternoon she brought Christina to Macy's in Center City. Security cameras show Wulu entering the store's Market Street doors, Christina trailing behind her: Wulu heads to the jewelry counter and inspects the baubles. For a moment, Christina is by her side. Then Christina wanders

off and returns twice before leaving for good. Within minutes, she exits onto Chestnut Street, heads west to Broad and nearly gets hit by a car before disappearing forever.

When Wulu noticed that Christina was gone, she didn't immediately call 911, as she had been trained to do in such a situation. Instead, she asked Macy's security for help to find her "friend." Fortyfive minutes pass before she lets a store security officer know that Christina is disabled and that she is her caregiver. A storewide bulletin is issued and a search of Macy's begins useless because, by now, Christina is gone.

Not until Christina is missing for an hour does Wulu call police. She tells the responding officer that she'd arrived at the store at 3 p.m. Only later does he learn she'd actually arrived at 2:20 p.m.

"That information could have been very helpful in the beginning part," the officer told the grand jury, "because we could have known [from video] that she had left the store already."

Christina's body was found the next morning, 5 miles away in West Philly, slumped between two cars. She had frozen to death. No one knows how she got there, because she was unable to use public transportation on her own. If Wulu had momentarily lost track of Christina and had immediately called 911, there is a chance Christina would've been found. But if Christina had perished anyway, it's doubtful that the grand jury would've recommended criminal charges. Because sometimes tragic mistakes happen.

An attorney for Casmir Care Services didn't comment about the presentment or about Wulu (for whom an arrest warrant has been issued). **But attorney Tom Kline, who represents the Sankey family, was eager to talk about this horrible case.**

"We're grateful for the patient and diligent followthrough that led to this presentment," said Kline, who has already settled a civil suit brought by the Sankey family against Casmir. "This was not a case of distraction; this was a case of notorious neglect by a caretaker who had an obligation to assure Christina's safety. The exact opposite occurred. There must be consequences for that."

My story about Christina last year was headlined "The Death No One Cares About," because her passing didn't seem to matter to anyone in an official capacity. I wrote it because I feared that Christina's heartbroken mom was right: Because Christina was poor, disabled, oddly behaved and terribly vulnerable, no one thought to consider that the circumstances of her death might be suspicious. First Assistant District Attorney Ed McCann read the story and was concerned enough to investigate.

On behalf of Christina's family, I thank McCann for that. All they ever wanted was for Christina's life to be considered worthy enough for its end to deserve scrutiny.