



Justice at last for autistic woman

Ronnie Polaneczky, Daily News Columnist
November 19, 2015

PATRICIA SANKEY thought she was one of the lucky ones.

For several years, a state-paid worker arrived daily to help care for Sankey's daughter, Christina, who was severely autistic and intellectually disabled. That gave Sankey, who is in her mid-70s and lives in poverty in South Philly, a break from the constant watchfulness that Christina required.

Christina, 37, was unable to speak, dress herself or use the bathroom alone, and she had the mental capacity of a toddler. She was also an "eloper," prone to wander, unafraid of strangers and busy streets, which she'd cross without heed to traffic.

So Sankey was relieved when the state began to provide help for Christina, who had required 24/7 oversight since birth.

Not every exhausted parent of a severely disabled child has access to such help. In Pennsylvania alone, more than 14,000 citizens with disabilities - children and adults alike - are on a waiting list for state-paid assistance.

But even when help comes, there's no guarantee the caretaker will do what he or she is supposed to do. Which, at minimum, should be to ensure the physical safety of the care receiver.

On March 6, 2014, Christina's caretaker, Hussanatu Wulu, failed horribly at her primary job. She took Christina into Macy's in Center City. Security footage shows Wulu entering the store on Market Street, Christina trailing behind, unattended and out of Wulu's direct sight. Wulu then stopped at a jewelry counter to inspect the baubles while Christina paced behind her.

Soon, Christina made a beeline for Macy's Chestnut Street doors. She exited, walked west and crossed Broad Street, where she was almost hit by oncoming vehicles. She then turned south on Broad and vanished.

Her body was found the next morning, 5 miles away, lying between two cars on a residential block. She had died of exposure in the frigid night air. She lay beneath a trash-can lid, which she perhaps had pulled onto herself for warmth.

I wrote about Christina's death in this column because it seemed that no one but her mother was bothered that Christina had perished while under the care of a professional aide who knew well Christina's tendency to wander. The column prompted a grand-jury investigation by the Philadelphia district attorney, which led to charges against Wulu.

Yesterday, Wulu, 34, a married mother of two, pleaded guilty to one felony count of neglect of care of a dependent person and a misdemeanor count of reckless endangerment. She will be under house arrest for 11 1/2 to 23 months, then on probation for three years.

Dressed in black, her head hanging low, Wulu wept and trembled through the court proceedings. When Judge Benjamin Lerner - who issued the sentence - asked if she wanted to make a statement, she shook with sobs.

"I want somebody to tell her mom that I'm sorry!" Wulu choked out. "I loved her daughter with all my heart and I pray that she forgives me. Please, someone tell her mom that."

It was a wrenching moment, a god-awful coda to Christina's god-awful death.

But for Sankey, Wulu's remorse means little, she told me when I called to share Wulu's message. Sankey hadn't had the fortitude to attend the hearing because she couldn't bear to lay eyes on the woman "who'd rather bury her nose in a jewelry counter than look out for my daughter."

"I think she should have gotten at least a year in jail for what she did," says Sankey, whose surviving adult daughter, Liza, 36, is also intellectually disabled but verbal and more capable than Christina had been.

"She still has her family. She still has both her children. My family is broken forever," says Sankey, who says her husband abandoned her when the girls were toddlers and as the severity of their disabilities became apparent. "We were three and now we are two. Her apology will not bring back our Christina."

Liza, she says, spends time every day in front of the living-room mantelpiece, where a photo of Christina stands alongside the red-and-white urn of her ashes.

She says good morning and good night to her sister. She describes her day at Hall-Mercer Community Mental Health Center, where she receives support services. She tells her that Thanksgiving is coming, that she and mom will make all of their favorite foods. She reminds her that Christmas will follow, that they will buy gifts for her the way they did last year, their first Christmas without her.

"Christina loved balls," sighs Sankey. "Last year, we had so many balls under the tree. Liza wants us to buy more balls. My house is filled with balls."

As she talks, I think about Wulu, whose anguish seemed genuine and who fled the courtroom in tears. She's a young woman with years ahead of her to ponder the worst decision she ever made. As it is for Sankey and Liza, Wulu's life is now split into two worlds - the one before Christina's death, the one after.

Is house arrest enough of a punishment? I don't know, honestly. Sankey's lawyer, Tom Kline, told me he just hopes Wulu is truly remorseful for "the avoidable death which causes pain every day to Christina's mother and sister."

Rest in peace, Christina. You've had your day in court. And you were not forgotten.