

Rage and — finally — action in death of disabled woman

MY COLUMN last Thursday enraged readers like Bill Gradwell on behalf of Christina Sankey.

"I can't get this story out of my head," emailed Gradwell, of Cape May. "Even with an endless pyramid of useless bureaucrats, a poor human being is dead and tossed away! What are we, The Black Hole of Calcutta? What was Christina, human garbage?"

Also among those concerned about Christina: the Philadelphia District Attorney's Office.

Deputy D.A. Ed McCann tells me that the office, along with Philly homicide detectives, will investigate the disappearance and death of the severely disabled and nonverbal 37-year-old. Her half-naked body was found between parked cars in West Philly March 7, a day after her state-paid caretaker lost track of her while they were inside Macy's in Center City.

The D.A.'s interest was welcome news to Sankey's newly retained attorney, Tom Kline. Yes, that Tom Kline — winner of megamillion-dollar awards.

"It's encouraging that the district attorney and Philadelphia



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police are going to investigate this in the serious fashion it deserves," said Kline, who is preparing a civil suit on behalf of Christina's mother, Patricia Sankey.

"This is a nightmare scenario for any parent of a severely handicapped child who is in the care of someone who is supposed to be responsible for their safety and care," he said. "The only job of the caretaker was to watch Christina and make sure no harm came to her. This appears to be a classic case of reckless endangerment."

That caretaker, Hussanatu

"Ayesha" Wulu, was employed by Casmir Care Services, which provided one-to-one care to Christina seven hours a day, six days a week. Attorney Kahiga Tiagha, speaking for Casmir's owner, Chetachi Dunkley-Ecton (who didn't return my earlier calls for comment), said Wulu no longer works for Casmir.

Citing HIPAA privacy laws, Tiagha wouldn't comment on Christina's death, which the state is investigating. He did say, though, that Patricia Sankey's comments about Christina's abilities and care plan (Sankey said her daughter was unable to dress herself and that she never should have been in a department store in the first place) are "patently false."

"At the appropriate time, we will make a statement to those issues," Tiagha told me.

He said, too, that my story gave the false impression that no one at the agency was concerned when Christina went missing and then died.

Sankey concedes that two Casmir administrators visited her the day after Christina's body was found, to offer "moral sup-

port." One of the executives even brought his own disabled son to visit with Sankey.

She rebuffed them at the door: "I didn't want moral support; I saw a woman walking "very aggressively" toward him, he said. She didn't speak, but her swiftness took him aback.

"She didn't seem like she belonged there. She looked a little disheveled and confused," he recalled. "I said, 'Can I help you?' She stopped and looked down. She didn't say anything. I got into my car and then I saw her walking toward a woman" — another driver, he presumed, as he exited the garage.

When he told a co-worker the next day about the odd encounter, she showed him an online story of how Christina had been found dead that morning, between cars in West Philly.

His heart sank.

"I feel terrible," says the man. "She might be alive if I had done something."

The second sighting occurred about 2 a.m. the next day. According to a police source, a woman who lives on 57th Street, near Master, came outside for a smoke and saw Christina sitting on the curb in the frigid air, playing with a cat. The woman finished her cigarette and went back inside.

Christina's lifeless body was discovered on the block about four hours later. Police believe she froze to death.

"Why would no one help her?" wailed Sankey when I told her

what I'd learned. In the next breath, she said, "They didn't know . . . they didn't know."

They didn't know that Christina was more than what she appeared to anyone who'd never enjoyed one of her hugs. She was cherished. She was fretted over. She was harmless. And she desperately needed help that she didn't have the ability to ask for.

Tomorrow would have been her 38th birthday. I don't know how her mother will get through the day without her. ■

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Christina Sankey's body was found in West Philly on March 7. The severely autistic woman's caretaker lost her at Macy's Center City.

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wanted my daughter back," Sankey says. "And why would you bring your disabled child to visit a woman whose disabled child you just lost?"

This case is just so miserable.

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Most heartbreaking is that there were at least two times when Christina might've been rescued, if only people had known she was in trouble.

The first happened the day she went missing, a caller told me after reading my piece.

"I am sure I saw Christina," said the man, who asked that I not identify him in this column.

He was on the third floor of the Amtrak parking garage at 30th Street Station. It was about 5:30 p.m. — by then Christina had been missing three hours — and out of the corner of his eye, he