

## **Family seeks answers; Woman was killed by car a day after mental crisis sent her to hospital**

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Cindy Ciarafoni was a wife, a mother of two, and a grandmother of four. You wouldn't have known it from the police news release about a woman struck and killed by a car in the centre lane of Highway 7 on Jan. 2.

But a family still grieving her sudden loss is seeking answers as to how the 48-year-old, who suffered from schizophrenia for 25 years, ended up in the middle of a highway at all.

Ciarafoni's 31-year-old daughter, Renee Ciarafoni-McGrath, said that when her mother was sent to hospital on New Year's Day, the family thought she had been admitted to the mental health unit. Such admissions had become sadly routine over the past three years; in fact, she'd been hospitalized roughly once a month for the past six months, usually at William Osler hospital in Etobicoke.

So the family didn't expect anything different when police dealt with her bizarre behaviour on Jan. 1 and she was taken by ambulance to the emergency room at Humber River Regional Hospital's Church St. campus. "We thought she was safe" for at least 72 hours, Ciarafoni-McGrath said – typically the minimum length of a stay.

But the next evening, police called her family to say a woman had been hit just after 5 p.m. by a Toyota Camry. She'd been in the centre eastbound lane of Highway 7 just east of Jane St., 10 kilometres north of the hospital. The only identification she carried was a piece of paper with their phone numbers on it. Ciarafoni had died in surgery after being rushed to Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre. The Camry's driver wasn't charged.

The family's grief is now mixed with feelings of guilt for not going to the hospital, as they often would – Cindy's care having become an exhausting ordeal. Persuading her to take medication throughout the day had become a constant challenge, as Cindy stayed at their Woodbridge home while her husband of more than 30 years, Danny Ciarafoni, was at work. Adding to the family's anguish was that Cindy never got to hold her newest grandchild, born days before she died.

Much of what happened to her in the 48 hours before her death is a mystery. What is known is that a bystander called police on Jan. 1, citing "bizarre behaviour" after Cindy handed over her small dog, Romeo, while walking him in the rain near her home. Police found Cindy, soaking wet, in a Coffee Time at Islington and Highway 7, coffee in hand. But she didn't respond to questions. The officers called Danny to come to the shop using a number they had on file, having encountered Cindy in a similar situation six weeks earlier.

An ambulance was called to take her to the hospital. The officers told Danny his wife would probably be admitted, as before. Danny trusted she'd be taken care of.

At first she was resistant about getting in, screaming and tensing her body, according to the EMS report released to the family. Eventually she went willingly, but unaccompanied by family members. The report indicates she was agitated, confused and unresponsive to questions on the way, resisting the attendants' attempts to remove her wet jacket and housecoat. The ambulance arrived at the hospital just before 5 p.m. The triage nurse was given the details Danny had provided about his wife's history with schizophrenia – including the fact she had been off her medication for at least a week.

Thirty minutes later, her care was transferred to the triage nurse and the EMS workers were free to go, according to the report. York EMS superintendent Louise Lorenc said that sometimes in such situations ambulance attendants or police would stay with the patient until she was admitted. "If the person wasn't in acute distress or was medically stable, that's going to be a decision up to the triage nurse," she said. "Once we've given our report ... it becomes the hospital's responsibility."

It's not clear what measures the hospital took, if any, to watch Cindy Ciarafoni as she waited in the emergency room to be reassessed. Hospital spokesperson Gerard Power said in an email to the Star that privacy laws forbid disclosing an individual's healthcare information.

But the hospital emergency record obtained by the family shows that when a physician attempted to begin a preliminary assessment six hours later, at 11:36 p.m., there was no answer – indicated by a slashed zero and the word "answer." Danny said he never received a call to tell him his wife had left without being assessed or admitted. The family complains that the hospital has not been forthcoming about what happened that night.

Normally, Power wrote, with patients who aren't judged to be a danger to themselves or others, "privacy legislation would prevent the hospital from contacting anyone with regard to their hospital stay, including the fact that they have been discharged." But Danny said he had always been called to pick his wife up when she was discharged before.

Without answers, the family said, there can be no closure in Ciarafoni's tragic death. "I just want people to pay for what they did," Danny said.