

SUSPENSION TO HEALTH/MH

On Tuesday, December 29, 1998, my son, Mark Sterlace, threatened to kill me. He was at my home and would not leave after many requests for him to do so. Eventually he left and I called the police.

Downtown I requested that a mental health warrant be sworn out.

My son, 35, has been a mental health client for twenty years with dozens of admissions to psychiatric units in local hospitals. His main diagnosis is schizophrenia with variations on the conclusion over the years, e.g., depression, manic-depression.

His behavior is erratic. Although he lives at an adult care residence he has free rein in whatever he chooses to do. No curfews impede him; no needed oversight is available.

He lives amidst squalor in a private room (private, because Mark is classified as homeless) at Bridgewell which the housekeeping staff has threatened to avoid cleaning, such is its condition. If that happens, he will be put in a room to share with another resident who is equally remiss in his hygiene.

Mark observes no care in his personal hygiene. He cannot bear the water in the shower and stands outside the shower to bathe (when he bathes). He shaves and shampoos every so often, and he fouls his underwear. When the latter occurs he may discard the underpants or continue to wear them.

On January 4, 1999, Mark left Bridgewell without a coat---and from what I know of Mark, without gloves and hat---and visited a family he knows. He also disdains the boots we bought weeks ago as "not fitting right". The temperature that night was 10 degrees.

Mark walks from North Buffalo to my home in Allentown, a distance of 3 miles; on one day he made that round trip three times. He walks because if he takes the train he fears he will throw himself in front of it. On the city bus (But he has already given away (or sold?) his bus pass) he is overly conscious of others and becomes very uncomfortable. This was also the case when he rode to a clients' day-program in a facility van---great psychological distress.

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Since being at Bridgewell Mark has lost 20 pounds. He recoups some of this weight when he is in hospital (at least three times in 1998) or when he would visit me for an overnight stay last year. Before his visits it was my common practice to hide everything that he might take: money, vitamins, anti-histamines, aspirin, alcohol--even rubbing alcohol. Mark is what is called a "drugstore junkie". When he has a bit of extra money he pools it with a friend's and purchases cold medicine. He and the friend each take ten of these capsules at a time.

The overnight stays here ended when, on one Friday, I couldn't pick Mark up and his meds (1½ days worth) were handed to him. On his way here he consumed half of the assorted pills.

Mark's weight loss is critical, and results from missing meals and/or not getting enough to eat at Bridgewell. Earlier in December Mark collapsed in Delaware Park and no one found him. He lay there for some time, and when he awoke he went on to Bridgewell. When I mentioned this to someone in Jim O'Malley's Bridgewell office (Buffalo Psychiatric Center's liaison there) there was a vague recollection of having heard about the episode. Perhaps I should have expected this based on what J. O'Malley recommended I consider Bridgewell: "Think of Bridgewell as a hotel."

Mark believes that I am a witch, that his father is the devil, and that he himself is Jesus. He suffers from delusions like these but he may also have hallucinations: He told me once that he saw large rats where he lived---at the Huron Hotel. That is really a rooming house, in the news recently when a fire broke out there. Perhaps the rats were not imagined. As recently as a few months ago Mark said that the Huron was fine with him, instead of Bridgewell.

In 1997, Mark was incensed with me when I intervened in his living situation. He was in a rooming house on West Delevan Avenue and, the electric bill not having been paid, the power was shut off. This was the owner's obligation. I soon stood in housing court beside the owner who was there being charged with some other infractions. I was allowed to give testimony about his lack of responsibility: All eight of his tenants on West Delevan opted to live by

candlelight instead of forcing the issue or moving out. I believe it became apparent to the media who appeared on the scene at my request as well as to home viewers that these tenants were people without good judgment

These recollections about my son may be seen as evidence of his need for more stabilization and treatment, care that I feel he is not receiving presently at Bridgewell. He has long been a danger to himself, and with his threat to me which I still feel strongly, he has proven a threat to others. I urge the court to prescribe Mark's placement at Buffalo Psychiatric Center for long-term care both to keep the public safe and to keep my son safe from himself.

Patricia Van Remmen
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January 10, 1999

Honorable George Pataki
Executive Chamber
The Capitol
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor Pataki,

Circumstances similar to mine are appearing in the newspapers on a regular basis, it seems. The mentally ill are making headlines much to the anguish and agony of their families and the serious concern of the general public.

Enclosed is a copy of a summary I composed of my mentally ill son's recent behavior. The report serves to document proofs of his unmet needs as he freely continues on his self-destructive path because of government's failure to recognize and answer those needs.

I will produce this report in court as I attempt to obtain special care for my son. That is what I can do at this stage of his illness---what can you do?

I expect some attention to a matter easily disregarded yet of immeasurable importance to so many of us. I ask you to read the enclosed----or any one of those recent, tragic news stories about the mentally ill----and imagine a family member of your own as one of the principals. Perhaps a leap of imagination can induce you to revise the direction of government spending that has deprived rightful recipients of monies channelled elsewhere.

I hope that the mentally ill and their families will one day have no need to write letters such as this, but that depends on you and----dare I say?----on your conscience. A response will be appreciated.

Yours sincerely,

Patricia Van Remmen

cc: Sam Hoyt
Anthony Nanula
James Stone
Commissioner/Quality of Care
Dennis Gorski
Judith Fisher
Ellen Grant-Bishop
Anthony Masiello
George Molnar
Lynne Shuster

New York Times

1/10/99

Subway Killing Puts Harsh Light On the Suspect's Mental Torment

By N. R. KLEINFELD with KIT R. ROANE

As far back as when he was 16 and first had an inkling that something was wrong with him, his life appeared to turn inward and downward. Until the police took him away, he lived in a basement shoe box of a room in Queens. He watched "The Simpsons" and listened to Pink Floyd and ceaselessly paced the linoleum floor.

He would prattle on about becoming a business executive, though he never progressed beyond landing a job at a Dunkin' Donuts that lasted one day. He yearned to have an adoring wife and family, but he had no real friends.

Adrift in his thoughts, he would wander through a graveyard and circle the streets of Queens in the dim hours before dawn. Acquaintances said he could not seem to grasp a future because he barely had a present.

From the recollections of those who knew him, Andrew Goldstein, the 29-year-old man accused of pushing Kendra Webdale to her death under a subway train on Jan. 2, felt forlorn and rootless, an uncomfortable and frustrated man in the grip of schizophrenia.

When someone with a mental illness kills, images are evoked of a crazed and wicked population that should be separated from the rest of society, even though research confirms that the mentally ill are generally no more dangerous than anyone

else. But many need more care than they get. Advocates who work with the mentally ill have been quick to conclude that Andrew Goldstein was one more person neglected by the system, that this tragedy reinforces the notion that there is too little money and too few programs to serve a needy population that is no longer kept in hospitals.

At this point, with Mr. Goldstein arraigned on a charge of second-degree murder and under observation at Bellevue Hospital Center, and with his past care under investigation by state and city officials, it is unclear how well or poorly Mr. Goldstein was served by the fragmented mental health system and by society. Nor is it clear whether the death on those subway tracks could have been prevented. There is always ambiguity and nuance in such stories. Mental illness defies a tidy narrative.

Mr. Goldstein's life, as pieced together from interviews with people who knew him and with state and city officials, is indeed untidy.

He was born in Queens on Sept. 26, 1969, and grew up in Little Neck. His parents divorced and his father moved to Delaware. Kevin Canfield, Mr. Goldstein's court-appointed lawyer, said that Mr. Goldstein had told him that his father is an anesthesiologist and his mother a secretary, and that he has two brothers. Mr. Can-

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