



'How could he be found competent after what he did?'

By **John Romano**

The mental health therapist, one of a parade over the years, recommended Christian Gomez might try socializing a little more. As if some coffee shop rendezvous would be therapeutic for an increasingly withdrawn schizophrenic who skinned and buried the family cat.

By that point, Christian was largely indifferent toward conversation. Unless you count the voices that bombarded him from beneath his bed at night. To escape that particular hell, he stood his mattress up against a wall and spent nights sitting in the dark living room of his family's Oldsmar home.

Meanwhile, behind a closed door, his mother slept with a kitchen knife under her pillow.

Maria Suarez Cassagne, or Pia to her family, did what she could for her middle child, at least as much as a single mother could afford. There were doctor's visits, surreptitious meds and at least one fruitless encounter with the state's Baker Act.

On the afternoon of Dec. 30, 2014, Christian's grandparents took him for a regularly scheduled visit with a therapist where it was decided the then-23-year-old needed to find a new psychiatrist.

The next day Christian cut off his mother's head.

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He is crazy no more. At least not according to the state of Florida.

After roughly three years in a state mental hospital, Christian Gomez, now 27, was declared competent to stand trial on July 9. Facing a life sentence, he accepted a plea deal that effectively works out to a 25-year sentence followed by 10 years of probation and treatment. Factor in time already served and the possibility of an early release, and he could potentially be free in another 20 years or so.

It's a possibility that has left his relatives deeply troubled.

And terribly frightened.

They feel as if the state's mental health system let them down before Pia's death, and now is abandoning Christian in the aftermath of her murder.

They wonder why help was impossible to find when their family needed it most, and how incarceration has become the de facto prescription for the state's criminally insane.

"I hate for another person to go through what my family has gone through. It's an injustice," said Christian's uncle, Mario Suarez. "He doesn't need to be in jail. He needs to be in a mental hospital.

"I wish that he could be sedated forever and not hurt anybody else. Because what he did was crazy. Nobody kills their mom and takes her head. People shoot other people, they stab other people. This was different. This was evil."

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Eight days after the death of Pia Cassagne, a 25-year-old man named John Jonchuck dropped his 5-year-old daughter Phoebe off the Dick Misener Bridge in full view of a St. Petersburg police officer.

The headlines were larger. The outcry was louder. The story of little Phoebe instantly crisscrossed the globe.

But in one overlooked respect, the stories of Christian Gomez and John Jonchuck shared more than just timing and the alleged murders of a family member:

They both appeared to be an indictment of Florida's mental health system.

For years, decades even, the state of Florida has been one of the worst in the nation when it comes to per-capita funding for mental health issues.

There are never enough beds. Never enough programs. Never enough hours devoted to treating the sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, husbands and wives consumed by mental health disorders.

"My mom loved Christian; she would do anything to protect him," said Christian's younger sister, Maria Jose Gomez. "But nobody could help us. She went to therapists, psychiatrists, counselors. Every time something else happened, they would say 'Up his (dose) of meds.' They didn't take the time to really look at Christian and figure out what was wrong with him."

Looking back, the destruction of the Gomez family was swift and unmerciful.

Once a happy and affectionate child, Christian began acting out around the time he turned 18. He couldn't hold down a job. He didn't want to drive. He stopped taking showers because he said Pia and Maria Jose were watching him through the television. He isolated himself from the rest of the family, often standing in the backyard talking to God and the stars.

There is a stack of papers detailing the number of mental health professionals and state agencies Pia contacted with the hope of getting long-term treatment for Christian. One document diagnoses him as schizophrenic. Another says he is bipolar. Others mention depression and psychotic behavior.

Seven years older than his sister, Christian began interacting with Maria Jose in inappropriate ways. So Pia made sure that the two were never home alone in the house.

Eventually, taking care of Christian cost Pia her job, family members say. Worried that she couldn't leave him alone — he once had been picked up by police for wandering around the neighborhood, asking people if he could live with them — she would bring him to Mease Countryside Hospital where she worked in admitting. Predictably, that strategy backfired, as well.

Unable to afford private in-patient care, and unable to find room in state facilities, she tried caring for him on her own. She would crush his pills and sprinkle them over his food because he refused to take his medication. Christian discovered the ruse and accused his mother of poisoning him.

The battle over his prescriptions was one of the motives police cited in Pia's murder.

"Our entire mental health system is broken," said Pinellas-Pasco Public Defender Bob Dillinger. "You can't expect to help people if you don't have enough funds to treat them.

"You see it over and over and over again."

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For years, Pia sought help for Christian. A place with 24-hour care. A place where he would be forced to take his medication. A place where he would be safe.

Exactly the type of place he was sent after killing her.

If that was the end of the story, it would be tragic but, in a small way, comforting to his family. Unfortunately, justice demanded something else.

Keeping Christian indefinitely in a state mental hospital means declaring him insane. It doesn't seem like that would be a stretch, but it comes with a caveat. If doctors later decide he is no longer a danger and a court agrees, he could be set free without any conditions.

Even though it seems unlikely a doctor would consider him ready for release any time soon, there are no guarantees.

"I would like to see a system where there is more confidence in our ability to keep someone in long-term care, and know that the community is going to be protected," said prosecutor Richard Ripplinger, who brokered the plea deal. "Sometimes we have to make compromises. We did what we thought was best all the way around."

In this case, the state kept Christian in a hospital long enough for the medications to calm him down. Where he once was attacking corrections officials, Ripplinger said Christian was recently able to sit across from a table without shackles on and discuss the ramifications of the plea arrangement.

The problem is his family feels victimized all over again.

If he's made progress in a mental hospital, they want him to stay there. They fear he will go off his meds in prison and never get the intensive therapy he needs.

They also wanted to be certain that they would never see him on the street again.

"So maybe he gets out in (20) years. What happens after that? Where is he going to go? His sister is afraid of him, I mean terrified. Not only did he kill her mom but he wanted to make her his woman," said his uncle, Mario Suarez. "They say they'll monitor him for 10 years and make sure he takes his medicine. He's not going to take his medicine. Everybody just washed their hands of him.

"How could he be found competent after what he did?"

Source:

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