

TOURISM

PORT CRUISE
HOPES LIFT



P5

IN THE COURTS

MAN JAILED
FOR RAPE



P4

DRAGONS

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P46

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Main picture by ORLANDO CHIODO

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Hostage
A True Story

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Hers was a life so shocking, so unbelievable, it was turned into a movie. Christine O'Neill was subject to unspeakable violence, sexual abuse and sadistic treatment for years after marrying a man who became a monster. But Christine's incredible story of survival came to a tragic end this year, the 64-year-old dying in a Warrawong housing commission flat - not through violence but neglect, and now her family wants answers. **BEN LANGFORD reports, Pages 6-7**

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Lonesome end to life of a survivor

**CHRISTINE O'NEILL
(FORMERLY MARESCH),
1958-2023**

BY BEN LANGFORD

SHE was a survivor of sadism and sexual violence, swept away from Wollongong by a Nazi bank robber, coerced into marrying him at 16 and forced to take part in his crimes, later immortalised on screen in a thriller movie.

The life of Christine O'Neill - previously known as Christine Maresch - almost defies description, other than that its ending was indisputably tragic: dying alone from hypothermia in a Warrawong housing commission flat in April, aged 64.

Pictures from the scene show O'Neill, who suffered from bipolar disorder among other health problems, and was receiving care under the National Disability Insurance Scheme, died surrounded by squalor.

The exact date is not known because it was days, perhaps more than a week, before she was found, her daughter Amanda Maresch said. The death certificate reads "between 3 April 2023 and 11 April 2023". It had not been a cold month.

The pictures show the floor stained from spills, kitchen benches filthy, and worse. Her family wants to know how it came to this and Amanda's complaint has now sparked an investigation into her mother's care.

Christine's body was found by a care worker who was concerned enough to enter the property.

"She was only 64," Amanda Maresch told the *Mercury*. "There wasn't adequate

heating in her apartment. One of the windows was broken and was boarded up, it was never repaired.

"I know that Mum was a difficult person who suffered from trauma and mental health issues ... she was bipolar, she wasn't the most stable person, but that doesn't mean she shouldn't have adequate care.

"It is unacceptable to me in this day and age that a woman should die from such a thing when being cared for under the NDIS, when a simple fix like buying a heater would have saved her life. Her apartment was beyond filthy - entirely unsanitary and a hazard to anyone who came inside, including her carers, and this should have been reported and rectified by her NDIS provider or referred onto someone who could help her manage her home and health."

The National Disability Insurance Agency referred questions to the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission, saying it funds service providers but doesn't oversee them.

But the NDIA was requested by one service provider in January this year to "reach out" to Ms O'Neill and try and organise her a new recovery coach. It is not known if this occurred. The NDIA would not comment when asked about this request.

"The National Disability Insurance Agency has been in contact with the family to express our deepest sympathies," the agency said in a one-line statement.

Amanda Maresch and her mother were estranged and had not spoken for



Christine O'Neill (then Maresch) outside Wollongong court house after she was charged in 2008. Picture by Orlando Chiodo.



Main picture shows the boarded up window at Christine's Warrawong flat. Insets show the squalor inside when she died.

some time.

"My relationship with her was frail as being an only child of someone with mental health issues our relationship had become strained, but we still spoke and kept in touch on special occasions," she said.

"I found it odd that she didn't answer her phone when we rang on Christmas Day but after speaking to [the

care worker] who took her for her fortnightly injections I get the impression mum was so heavily medicated she was actually unable to care for herself on the most basic of levels."

Amanda hopes that her mother's profile can somehow help improve things for people who are not receiving adequate care. She spoke with Minister for the NDIS

Bill Shorten's office and lodged a formal complaint with the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission in early May. The Commission is now investigating.

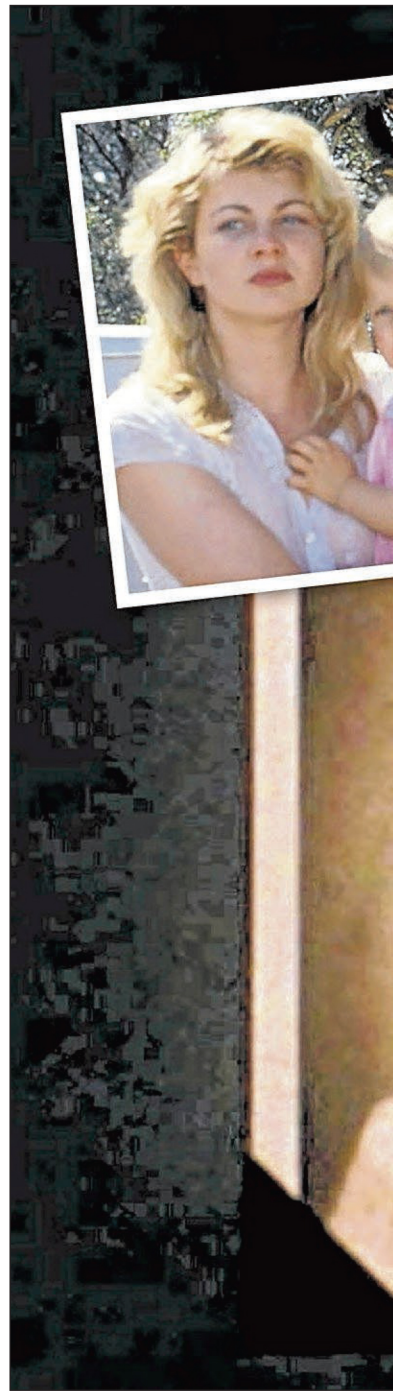
"The NDIS Commission has an active inquiry underway regarding the circumstances of Ms O'Neill's death, including the quality and safety of the NDIS supports and services she was to re-

ceive," a spokesperson said.

"We are engaging with the family and keeping them updated on the progress of the inquiries."

Early April was not a particularly cold time in the Wollongong area, with Bureau of Meteorology data showing temperatures not sinking below 15 degrees except for on the 11th and 12th of the month, when the minimum hit 12.2 degrees. A huge storm dumped 40.8mm on April 2.

Hypothermia most likely occurs at very cold temperatures, but also if a person is chilled from contact with



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From left - a still from the movie, with Kerry Mack and Ralph Schicha; Christine and Amanda in the film's closing credits; the movie's poster. Screen shot from Hostage by Frontier Films.

Christine to write her book.

Back to real life

In later years Christine had gone back to using her parents' name, O'Neill, and it is this recorded on her death certificate.

She had married again at age 37, to a man named Frank Ellerbrock, but the pair later divorced.

Legal trouble was to follow in 2008 when a magistrate in Wollongong Local Court found she had assaulted a woman with a glass at the Beaches Hotel in Thirroul.

The court heard it happened during an argument that started when Maresch verbally abused Paul Comelli, brother of Anita's Theatre founder John Comelli, after the opening celebration for Anita's. The magistrate found the offence proved but adjourned the case for mental health advice.

Ms O'Neill had multiple NDIS service providers. Her Local Area Co-ordinator was from Uniting. She briefly had a "recovery coach" but this ended more than a year ago. A complaint about her declining care had been made to one of the groups some weeks before her death.

Uniting said it could not comment specifically but said it "does not provide support co-ordination or personal support services in the Illawarra".

Amanda Maresch is in the process of digitising her mother's book for re-release. She doesn't know if her father is alive. He was deported to Germany in 1986.

The end of Christine's life leaves serious questions to be answered. Her family hopes the investigation will lead to better care.

She was a courageous survivor of violence, sexual abuse, shootings and a criminal husband who kept her captive for years - yet somehow she died in circumstances where she should have been, at last, safe.

A memorial service will be held for Christine O'Neill on June 24 in Perth.

water. Older people and those with poor circulation are more at risk.

The Hostage story

Christine O'Neill was 16 when she met Walter, a German she got to know while working at a travelling carnival. Christine got a job there and they had an affair - the start of a violent decade across three continents, in the grip of a monster.

Her autobiography *Hostage: My Own Story* is a harrowing tale, a devastating insight into the mind of a horribly abused woman. An optimistic teenager seeking

adventure and something better than the violent home she grew up in, came out of it as a hardened survivor of major traumas.

In the early 1980s it was turned into a movie directed by Frank Shields, called *Hostage: The Christine Maresch Story*, billed as "a true story". It was part of a wave of low-budget Australian films branded "Ozploitation" for their heavy doses of sex, violence and/or horror.

In the book Christine writes about how she was coerced into marrying Walter - when he threatened to shoot himself if she didn't.

He pulled the trigger, then refused medical treatment unless she said yes.

They lived in humble accommodation near Port Kembla and before she turned 17 Christine was pregnant with Amanda. Scenes from the movie showed the couple speeding around Cringila and Port Kembla in a red Mercedes; the reality became darker as Walter became more controlling.

After Walter lost his job they moved from town to town around Australia with his treatment of her growing more violent. Eventually they moved to Germany,

where Walter took to robbing banks to help fund his attempt to revive the Nazi Party. Christine was forced to participate after Walter kidnapped Amanda.

They eventually left Germany, heading east, and survived an attack by bandits in Turkey in which Walter slit one man's throat, spilling blood across his wife and daughter in the process. He would remind her often how he saved her life.

Christine returned to Australia with Amanda, but Walter arrived and they again moved from town to town, the violence worsen-

ing to the point Christine and Amanda were at one stage locked in a cellar.

A survivor, Christine told her story so unflinchingly that being tied to a bed and raped, or shot with a rifle or a crossbow, are described in no more lurid detail than time spent renovating a houseboat. The horror needed no embellishment.

Both were eventually arrested, Christine as an accessory. Walter was jailed for 14 years; Christine got a bond.

The Mercury has tried several times to contact Shields, who was said to have been instrumental in encouraging



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