

NEWS

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.

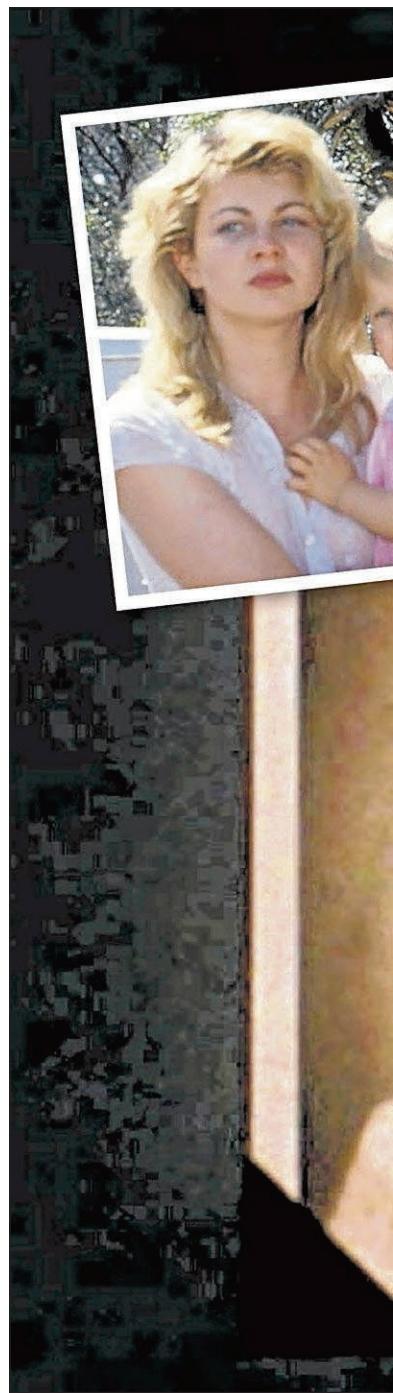
"The NDIS Commission has an active inquiry underway regarding the circumstances of Ms O'Neill's death, including the quality and safety of the NDIS supports and services she was to re-

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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