



A year later: Agency still dealing with therapist's murder at hands of her patient

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NORTH ANDOVER — Earl "Skip" Stuck looks down at his hands in concentration before he starts to talk about Diruhi Mattian's final visit to 3 Walker Road, his typically upbeat demeanor gone.

It is something Stuck has thought about many times — something he knows will stay with him for the rest of his life.

A year later, he tears up when asked to speak about his former employee, a 53-year-old Armenian psychotherapist who, with a slight accent, called everyone she came across "my friend."

Friday marked the first anniversary of the tragic house call in North Andover, where Mattian was fatally stabbed by her 18-year-old patient when she tried to take a knife away from him, afraid he would hurt himself.

"She was as good a person as we had," Stuck said from his Lawrence office. "If it was a brand new worker out of college killed, you'd say he didn't know what he was doing. But I wouldn't second guess any of her decisions.

"It's been a tough year in a lot of ways," he said.

Mattian's co-workers and family described her last week as a serious yet gentle-hearted woman who was passionate about her work — helping people, even those with profound mental illness, have a chance at a normal life.

She genuinely believed there is good in everybody, they said; that given help, anyone can succeed.

And they say the Wilmington resident would be pleased that her death has not deterred mental health workers from helping the most troubled of patients.

In fact, the tragedy has brought her entire agency closer. It has led mental health agencies across the state to scrutinize their safety training and protocol, and has brought her daughter on a journey back to their native Armenia.

"She left a legacy behind. She taught me that it's not just a job you come to. It's more than that," said former co-worker Norma Ortega. "It reinforced my belief of this work, of helping people."

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The morning after Mattian's death, Stuck ran around frantically, trying to keep television cameras from his employees, who were just learning the news.

He drove to Lawrence General Hospital, where 18-year-old Thomas Belanger was being arraigned for Mattian's murder from his hospital bed, hoping the cameras would follow him.

Stuck remembers thinking his agency was on the brink of falling apart.

"Ask me on that day and I would have made an assumption that we'd lose a lot of staff," he said. "There were spouses, parents, boyfriends all asking, 'Why would you want to do this type of work?'"

But in the end, only one of Family Continuity's 300 employees left.

Co-workers instead took over her case loads, blogged about Mattian, set up a scholarship fund and e-mailed back and forth with her two daughters, ArminÃ© and Ani.

"She would not want us second-guessing what we do because of this," Stuck said.

Mattian had been working with Thomas Belanger and his family on Walker Road for nearly a decade by the afternoon of Feb. 6, 2008.

She came to Family Continuity as an intern seven years ago, and advanced up the ranks to director of the agency's flexible support program. Unlike other directors, she still saw clients and made house calls, working out of a small office on Lawrence Street.

That day, she had been visiting with a hospitalized Elaine Belanger at Lawrence General when she was asked to check on Thomas and his younger sister at their Walker Road apartment.

The sister later told police Mattian stood at Thomas Belanger's bedroom doorway, pleading with him to hand over a knife he was holding, according to prosecutors.

Little is known of what happened between Mattian and Belanger right before her death. The sister was in her bedroom and an aunt outside parking her car. Belanger says he does not remember.

But police say he stabbed her fatally in the upper torso before slitting his own throat.

Mattian was able to stumble into the building's foyer and dial 911 on her cell phone, saying, "He hit me. Help me. I'm feeling faint."

Stuck still believes the benefits of home-based care for those with mental illnesses far outweigh the potential dangers. He said by working within patients' natural surroundings, they recognize themselves as members of their families and communities.

His employees go into hundreds of homes every year where nothing happens.

Co-worker Ortega, a family therapist, said it took her a while to work through Mattian's death.

"For me, it was kind of tough," she said. "Friends, family, people who didn't even know me would sit me down

and question me. After a while, I started second-guessing myself."

Dan Larson, a mentor, said Mattian encouraged him to get his degree in social work, something he hadn't even realized he wanted to do at the time.

"She brought us all together," Larson said. "She cared so much about people. She was family orientated and she brought that on the job."

"You felt cared by her. I'm sure families felt the same way," he said.

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Armin Nalbandian is living in the house where her mother, Diruhi Mattian, grew up in Yerevan, Armenia.

The family had fled Soviet rule in the 1980s to settle in Massachusetts. Nalbandian is there conducting a yearlong research project on Turkish-Armenian reconciliation as a Fulbright scholar, something that would have made her mother proud.

"My mom's death has motivated me to pursue my vision with even greater fervor than before," Nalbandian said. "In moments of weakness, I remember her perseverance ... She is with me at every turn."

Nalbandian was the first person police called because her phone number came up several times on Mattian's cell phone history.

Her mother was supposed to visit her in Boston that night, and Nalbandian started growing panicked as it got later and her mother was not answering her phone.

"I assumed it was a car accident since it was raining that night," she said.

She returned to school a couple weeks later, despite protests from family, friends, even professors. She gave the Northeastern commencement speech, speaking to thousands about her mother's murder only a few months after it had happened.

Nalbandian said she has learned "enough to fill 20 volumes of books" from her mother.

"She was deeply devout, positive, light-hearted and full of warmth," Nalbandian said. "You felt good just being in her general vicinity."

Nalbandian said forgiving Belanger was never a question, nor was it difficult.

She still receives correspondence from the district attorney's office about the case, but in general, she doesn't feel compelled to know the details.

"What's done is done," she said. "I have never walked in his shoes, I have no idea what he has gone through, but I am sure he is feeling tortured and alone right now and I hope that he can find true peace within himself one day."

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The day of Feb. 6, Mattian had phoned the agency to say she was visiting the hospital, and again to say she was

on her way to 3 Walker Road.

"It was protocol to call to say where you're going," Stuck said. "She followed the policy, and 15 minutes later she was dead."

The tragedy forced the agency to take a hard look at its safety procedures.

Family Continuity revamped its safety training at all of its offices across the state. They teamed with public universities and other agencies to develop cross-training curricula.

Stuck is asked to speak on safety at other agencies all the time now. Several employees sit on national and statewide safety boards.

"It's not that we have all the answers," he said. "We're just a bit smarter now, more aware. We've had to deal with this."

There's now a risk check list employees must use when visiting clients. If there is a weapon, or the client is in a rage or under the influence of drugs, therapists are told to leave immediately.

The small Lawrence office where Mattian worked is field testing hand-held security beepers that emit a high-pitched noise.

"We've done all these things. Now that it's been a year, it's important to keep the safety issue alive even as the tragedy fades," he said.

There had been no reported incidents before Mattian's death or after.

Stuck hopes there is no trial, so his employees and Mattian's family do not have to be dragged through the tragedy all over again.

There are still things Stuck cannot get out of his mind.

Two weeks before her death, Mattian stood before a company-wide staff meeting and spoke of how she was offered a job in the San Francisco area.

Her daughters had been trying to convince her to move to the West Coast, where Ani lived.

"She gets up and says two years ago, she would have went, but the agency is going in the right direction and she wants to be part of what's going on here," he said. "I think how this wouldn't have happened if she were in San Francisco."

Then there's the gut-wrenching thought, that even with the new safety initiatives, that something could happen again.

"We can't guarantee there will never be another tragedy like Diruhi's," he said. "The sad news is this could happen again. But we can do whatever it takes to try."

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Photos



Earl Stuck, CEO of Family Continuity, stands behind a photo of former employee Diruhi Mattian, who was killed last year by a patient. Staff Photographer