



Chris White, 48, of West Grove, Pa., was executive director of Community Legal Aid Society of Delaware.

MEMORIAL FUND

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Victim was advocate for Delawareans in need

Chris White struck, killed in hit-and-run

By GARY SOULSMAN • The News Journal • April 23, 2010

He was remembered as one of the good guys. And he was gone in an instant.

Lawyers, state legislators and New Castle County leaders Thursday mourned the death of Christopher W. White, who was standing on a Wilmington sidewalk Wednesday when he was fatally struck by a hit-and-run driver.

No arrests had been made as of Thursday night.

"He gave years of his life to tackle some of the most profound problems and did so gladly," Gov Jack Markell said of the 48-year-old executive director of [Community Legal Aid Society](#) who lived in West Grove, Pa.

"He was a voice for those in need and touched thousands of lives. The word tragic seems to fall sadly short here."

White was a housing advocate first and foremost. He was known for his work to combat homelessness and to lessen the housing crisis by helping homeowners mediate foreclosures.

He also applied his legal skills to writing a new state law to settle conflicts between manufactured-home owners and reworked New Castle County's landlord-tenant code so tenants could better understand their rights.

The afternoon of his death, White was standing outside two places he loved -- Saints Andrew and Matthew Episcopal Church and the Shipley Lofts, a renovation of the long-vacant United Way building. White shepherded Shipley Lofts through all sorts of hurdles at 701 Shipley St. and was at the corner there when he was killed.

A moment of silence was held in the Delaware House and Senate for White, who exhibited a "rare combination of intelligence, compassion and selflessness" by giving voice to those who struggle to have their voices heard, Rep. John Kowalko, D-Newark South, said on the House floor.

And Chief Justice Myron T. Steele of the Supreme Court of Delaware praised White, saying he will be "deeply missed" for his fervor in fighting for the poor at the local and national level.

New Castle County Executive Chris Coons said he considered White a role model and hero.

"I joked that I wanted to be him when I grew up," said Coons at an Earth Day event as he fought back tears.

Others agreed that White had a huge heart for helping people with everything from food stamps to consumer protection.

"You wonder how Chris could do what he did because he was extended beyond what most people could do, but he did it all with a smile," said Jerry Bilton, director of the Community Service Building Corp., where CLASI had its Wilmington office.

"Tragic is absolutely a word for his death," said James G. McGiffin Jr., a CLASI lawyer and the former executive director who recruited White. "Chris White was 48 years old with a wife and two kids. They need him and we need him. Everyone talks about helping our fellow man but, for him, it was his way of life."

Lofts to be dedicated today

ShIPLEY Lofts happened because of the dedication of White to overcome problems that came close to demoralizing the board of ShIPLEY Village Development Corp., said the Rev. Lloyd Canon Casson, former rector of SsAM who conceived the idea of the lofts in 1998. An opening and dedication are set for today.

"I am hoping [today] is a tribute to him and I think his name should be inscribed in those walls," Casson said.

Reflecting on the accident, Wilmington Mayor James M. Baker said it's hard to fathom people who act recklessly and take someone's life.

"I don't know what goes through people's mind when they act so irresponsibly," he said. But just because society is full of dysfunctional people, you don't give up on a city.

"You keep pouring your heart out to make the city better -- it's what Chris White did," Baker said.

The opening of ShIPLEY Lofts is set for 5 p.m. and the mayor's office debated postponing the opening. But George White said his brother, Chris, would not want the opening delayed. He would want the 23 units opened, said George, who will represent Chris at the event.

"I'm going to thank everyone for making it happen and hope I don't lose my composure," George said.

The two are "preacher's kids," raised in an Episcopal family on Cape Cod. Their father -- the Rev. G. David White -- was rector of the Church of the Holy Spirit in South Orleans.

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Chris got a taste of the law as an intern one summer and went on to Suffolk University Law School in Boston. He found his niche working for Harvard Legal Aid.

Mcgiffin met Chris in 1991 at a job fair in public-interest law. He liked the young lawyer's geniality and magnetic personality.

"He had all the gifts of a lawyer who could have earned a ton of money," said Drewry Fennell, executive director of the ACLU of Delaware.

He was funny, self-deprecating, quick, smart, creative and a wonderful colleague -- "he was the whole package," Fennell said.

"But he wasn't interested in massive litigation or a lot of money," Mcgiffin said.

Chris quickly rose to be deputy director and was brilliant at fundraising and in good times was able to boost the CLASI budget, Mcgiffin said. And, when Mcgiffin wanted to return to being a CLASI lawyer, he suggested Chris as his replacement.

In lean times, Chris agonized over having to lay people off and gave himself a salary reduction to save staff, George said.

Jackie Paradee Mette, executive director of the Delaware Bar Foundation, said Chris believed in the agency's mission and was authentic in his passion.

"What an amazing person," she said.

Mcgiffin agreed, saying there are talented people in CLASI but now there is nobody quite like Chris.

"I am, frankly, a little nervous about our future," he said.

A memorial service will be held a week from today at SsAM, 719 Shipley St., though the time has not been set.

Chris is survived by his wife, Leandria Hall of West Grove, Pa., where she and Chris lived with their children Joshua, 12, and Kayla, 6. He is also survived by his brother, George, of Little Falls, N.J.; and his mother, Donna, of South Orleans, Mass.

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