

# Her death sentence

## Untreated cancer kills longest-held female inmate at 61



BY STEPHEN REX BROWN  
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New York's longest-serving female inmate died Tuesday at the age of 61. Her supporters say the cancer that killed her went undetected for a year — and that she deserved a shot at parole.

Valerie Gaiter was sentenced to 50 years to life for murdering an elderly couple in Flatbush, Brooklyn, during a robbery in 1979. She was only 21 years old when she and a companion, desperate for drugs, stabbed the couple more than 70 times.

In the nearly four decades that followed, Gaiter became a model inmate. She loved the Puppies Behind Bars program, where she trained service dogs for veterans and first responders with PTSD. She acted as a mentor to new arrivals in the women's jail.

"She was very pleasant and warm. Being an older woman, a lot of the younger women took her advice, gravitated toward her," said Donna Robinson, 64, whose incarcerated daughter became close with Gaiter behind bars beginning in 2017.

When attorney Amanda Bashi or her law students visited Gaiter, prison guards occasionally asked. "When are you getting her out of here?"

Bashi recalled.

"Everything that was available she pretty much participated in," said Bashi, who was preparing to file a clemency application on Gaiter's behalf. An application Gaiter filed herself in 2012, but was rejected.

"She trained numerous dogs. She loved that the dogs she trained were going to help people. Valerie felt that it was her way to give back. It was something very important to her," said Bashi, who took the Democratic Legislature to task for failing to pass a bill that would have made elderly inmates like Gaiter eligible to go before the Parole Board.

"Had that passed, Valerie would have qualified, plain and simple," Bashi said. "She would have made a very strong case."

Staff at the prison wrote over 20 letters of support for Gaiter, who enjoyed special privileges granted to model prisoners.

"She is able to spin straw into gold," wrote Kathleen Milkowski, an offender rehabilitation coordinator at the women's prison in Westchester.

"I have seen Ms. Gaiter when she is faced with disappointment and obstacles. She picks herself up, dusts off and

keeps moving forward. She uses these experiences as learning tools toward becoming a better Ms. Gaiter."

For over a year, Gaiter had complained to staff about pain in her throat, documents show. Swallowing was painful and she had difficulty keeping her food down. Prison medical staff diagnosed her with acid reflux, paperwork provided to the Daily News show. A month ago, doctors found cancer in her esophagus, according to medical records reviewed by The News. By then she was a frail 80 pounds and could barely eat or sleep. A surgeon noted she arrived at the hospital on July 6 suffering from "severe malnutrition."

"The medical treatment there (at Bedford Hills), for lack of a better word, sucks," Robinson said, adding that doctor's appointments are often made months in advance.

Gaiter never got healthy enough for chemo and died in Mount Vernon Hospital, according to Bashi. Right up to the end, Gaiter held out hope she would be released.

She had a lot of time to reflect on her horrific crime. In 1979 Gaiter and a teenage girl barged into the Flatbush apartment of an elderly couple and demanded money for

Valerie Gaiter, shown as a participant in the Puppies Behind Bars program at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, and with her mother (far left), served nearly 40 years for the 1979 murder of a Brooklyn couple.

drugs. Rose Feit, 73, died from 28 stab wounds. Louis, who was 80, suffered around 50 stab wounds and also died.

"I am truly sorry to have entered the victims' home and violated them in such a brutal manner. I cannot take back that pain the family has felt over their deaths, and for that I am totally remorseful," Gaiter wrote in a letter in the last year of her life.

"I was stupid, misled and not caring about others. That person is NO longer here or exists within me ... The woman I am today would never behave so violently or angry towards another innocent human being as I did 39½ years ago. The impact of what I did and the pain I have caused their family will live with me for the rest of my life and forever be a reminder of what I was then and how I can never be again."

The Feits' daughter, Amber Grumet, did not return an email requesting comment. In an interview with City Limits last year, Grumet said she struggled to reconcile her own trauma with her belief in

rehabilitation.

"I'm very torn between my own individual situation and between my politics and philosophy," Grumet said.

Advocates of parole reform are planning a rally next week to highlight Gaiter as a prime example of the need for legislation allowing elderly inmates a chance at parole. Supporters of reform see a looming crisis of elderly people behind bars. By 2030, the population of inmates 50 and older will account for one-third of all incarcerated people in the country, according to one report. In New York, 17% of women in prison are 50 and over.

"Ms. Gaiter, like so many others, died in prison without any meaningful opportunity for release and despite her extraordinary rehabilitative efforts while in prison," David George, of the Release Aging People in Prison advocacy group, said. "If the Democratic leadership in the Senate and Assembly want to prevent more deaths from happening, then they must pass elder parole."