

## CHICAGOLAND

# Sick dog's owner didn't have to die

Saturday's dramatic standoff began with a call to Chicago police from a Buffalo Grove animal hospital.

A Northwest Side man who'd just been told his dog had cancer was distraught, barely coherent and talking about killing himself, hospital personnel said. They were worried.

The man's neighbors in the 3600 block of North Tripp Avenue were worried as well. Sandy, the 11-year-old shepherd mix the man adopted long ago from a shelter, was the only "family" he had.

He was 66, retired, otherwise alone and, neighbors said, in the terminal stages of lung cancer. "Funny, quirky and eccentric," is how Angela Leventopoulos, who lived down the block from the man for 20 years, described him. "Amicable," added Aristides Troncoso, who lived across the street. "A good man. He was what you'd call a character."

Sandy was at the vet for knee surgery, but a routine X-ray Friday had turned up tumors on her lungs. It's unclear from various accounts whether this news set off or merely hastened what happened next.

JoAnn Stewart, administrator of the Veterinary Specialty Center, said the man "seemed to have a hard time comprehending the diagnosis" when she explained it to him over the phone. Earlier, she said, he'd told her that fixing Sandy's knee was something he wanted to take care of before he died.

Troncoso said when he talked to the man Friday night, he seemed to be under the impression that Sandy wasn't going to live until morning and that he saw no reason to live on without her. Troncoso said the man felt he had exhausted acceptable treatment for his own cancer.

The next part of the story you may already know: Chicago police made a well-being check on the man early Saturday. When he didn't respond to them, they established a security perimeter around his house, fearing he might be armed because of what he'd been saying to the veterinary staff about wanting to kill himself. A headline-making standoff ensued.



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the man's two-story house some 13 hours later, they found him dead of an apparently self-inflicted gunshot wound.

The reason I'm not naming him is that his next of kin, if indeed he has any, have not been notified. Neighbors on the street where he's lived since 1977 said he never spoke of having any relatives, and his only other friends appeared to be men with whom he said he'd served in Vietnam. But they didn't really come around much.

Stewart said she and veterinary staff tried to assure the man before and during the standoff that his dog's cancer appeared isolated and that surgery might give her another year or two of life.

Troncoso wrote in an e-mail: "I don't think [he] understood, after hearing about Sandy, that he had in his friends the strength to regain his freedom from grief, to seek viable medical alternatives [for himself], and—if it need be—to die with dignity."

If there's a moral to this story of desperation, loneliness and an old man's love for his dog, maybe that's it—there's more help out there than you know, but you've got to meet it halfway.

Sandy remains at the animal hospital awaiting surgery and then, perhaps a new home. The man's body remains at the Cook County medical examiner's office, unclaimed.



## Change of Subject

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