

THE IMMORALITIES OF JENNIFER SMITH

By Joe Roubicek

It was New Years Day, 1991 when Christine Cobb, a 64-year-old retired postal worker, was transported to the Towers Apartments, a quaint Mediterranean-style building by the water in a quiet community of Fort Lauderdale. The building was an adult living facility or “ALF,” a group home for seniors with disabilities.

Christine cried with relief on this, her first day of freedom from the Broward General Hospital’s psychiatric ward. She had been under observation after being committed using a law called the Baker Act, which allows a person who may be dangerously mentally ill to be held for an involuntary mental exam.

She suffered mental disabilities to the extent that she was unable to maintain her concentration for extended periods of time, but she was not mentally ill and she was never a danger to anyone.

Christine’s problems began two months earlier when she had moved into another group home that was quite different from the Towers Apartments. It was just a one-story house whose owner and operator, Jennifer Smith, believed in commitment. Not commitment to helping others, of course, but instead the commitment of elderly people for profit.

Smith was a 29-year-old attractive woman described as being generally “polite and pleasant” by some witnesses in the case. (Though Christine Cobb referred to her as a “nightmare,” someone who had stolen Christine’s property, freedom and dignity.)

Smith was a prior employee of the state’s Adult Protective Services agency and so she was very familiar with the procedures regulating group homes in Florida. She also had worked for a bank and understood check cashing procedures. After opening up an illegal and unlicensed adult living facility and attracting disabled elderly residents like Christine, Jennifer Smith used her prior occupational knowledge cruelly for her own profit.

First, Smith took Christine’s purse and refused to return it despite Christine’s demands. When Christine finally became agitated and demanded her purse be returned,

Jennifer Smith falsely reported Christine as being violent, a danger to herself and others, and had her committed to a psychiatric hospital for a mental evaluation under the state's Baker Act law. Christine later testified that she repeatedly asked for her purse back, but Smith denied taking it and then agitated her with comments that Christine was "crazy" or "imagining things."

Christine cried foul, infuriated with Smith and her lies, but no one would listen. The more upset she became, the more they restrained her, and eventually she became despondent.

For unknown reasons (the psychiatric hospital's financial gain?), Christine was held for observation for 30 days instead of the customary three days. It wasn't until well after her release that health care workers admitted there never was any basis for committing her in the first place.

While Christine was confined, Smith began forging the elderly woman's name on checks and cashing them at the bank in a manner called a "cash-back deposit." This involves the partial deposit of monies from a check that is being cashed, which creates less suspicion among bank tellers. Smith used her own identification, believing she could report her own purse as stolen and insist that the thief who had stolen her ID was the person who had cashed the checks. Incredibly, though, she cashed Christine's checks at the bank where she had worked, so of course the tellers recognized her during these transactions.

Although not much, the victim's entire savings were emptied from the account over several weeks and Christine was captive for a month in the psychiatric ward while Smith became \$10,000 richer.

This cruel scheme didn't end until after Christine had been released from the psychiatric hospital. The administrator of the Towers Apartments, where Christine had been relocated, took an interest in her complaints and looked into the losses, finding Jennifer Smith's name on the checks. Finally someone "heard" Christine when she cried foul.

The administrator notified the police and the case was ultimately assigned to me. My task of putting together criminal charges against Jennifer Smith was relatively easy

because once someone simply listened to poor Christine's cries for help and took her seriously, the crimes committed against her became glaringly obvious.

I obtained positive identification of Smith as cashing Christine's checks by the same tellers Smith once worked with as a former bank employee. She was arrested and charged with exploitation of the elderly. Finally justice was served.

Jennifer Smith's acts were downright immoral. Vernon Howard once wrote, "The terrible immoralities are the cunning ones hiding behind masks of morality, such as exploiting people while pretending to help them." But something more significant also happened here...

Our villain, Jennifer Smith, lost her precious freedom by way of an arrest for her exploitation of Christine Cobb, but at least she had a choice in the matter. Like any other person accused of a crime, Smith was also presumed innocent until proven guilty in a court of law. She had constitutional rights.

Christine, on the other hand, was presumed to be mentally ill and had to prove otherwise to win back her freedom – simply because Smith said that she was crazy.

Smith had more rights *as a criminal* than Christine Cobb had as an upstanding and decent senior citizen who was simply accused of "being crazy."

This was an immoral social injustice.

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