

After failed execution last week, Christa Pike is conscious and talking, attorneys say

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Christa Gail Pike is conscious and speaking nearly a week after the state of Tennessee's failed attempt to execute her by lethal injection, her attorneys announced Tuesday.

"Against all odds, Christa Pike is conscious, speaking, and continues to receive critical medical care. Despite the severe damage she endured to her arms, she is still handcuffed and shackled to the bed. Her recovery is medically unprecedented. Her prognosis remains unclear but, at a minimum, we expect a long recovery," Randy Spivey and Kelly Gleason of the Tennessee Office of the Post Conviction Defender and Stephen Ferrell and Luke Ihnen of Federal Defender Services of Eastern Tennessee said in a statement.

Pike, 50, was scheduled on September 30 to become the first woman executed in Tennessee since it was a slave state. She was sentenced to death for the January 1995 murder of 19-year-old Colleen Slemmer, a fellow student at the Job Corps center in Knoxville. Pike, then 18, and her 17-year-old boyfriend, Tadarly Shipp, lured Slemmer to a secluded area, where she was beaten and killed. Shipp, a juvenile at the time, was sentenced to life in prison.

"She survived two complete rounds of lethal injection per Tennessee's protocol, despite her attorneys' warning to the state of specific challenges with her veins," the attorneys' statement said.

Those warnings had been explicitly laid out by her attorneys. In their petition for a stay filed with the US Supreme Court, Pike's lawyers argued that her small, fragile veins and a blood disorder, thrombocytosis, would make establishing IV access difficult and that lethal injection would cause her "serious pain and suffering" in violation of the Eighth Amendment's ban on cruel and unusual punishment.

On the night of September 30, the execution team

took about an hour and multiple attempts to establish IV lines. The first dose of pentobarbital was administered at 7:30 p.m. Central Time. Four minutes later, Pike said, "My arm feels like it's about to burst open," according to media witnesses. For the next half hour she breathed deeply, snored, yawned and moved on the gurney. At 7:46 p.m. prison officials closed the curtains to the death chamber, reopening them three minutes later, apparently after administering a second dose. Witnesses described her snoring, grunting and making choking sounds. At 8:05 p.m. the curtains were closed again, and the journalists were left in the dark for some 50 minutes before being ordered out. Pike was then rushed to a Nashville-area hospital.

Her attorneys believe the IV lines were improperly placed or her veins had blown, causing the caustic drug to flow into the tissue of her arms rather than her bloodstream. Her arms were burned, blistered and swollen when she arrived at the hospital. She was placed on a ventilator while doctors worked to clear the pentobarbital from her system, and she remained unconscious through the weekend. As recently as Sunday, Ferrell said he was not aware of her having regained consciousness at any point.

The attorneys thanked the ambulance crew and hospital staff for providing Pike with humane care, as well as the many people who have sent messages over the past week, writing:

"We are incredibly grateful to the first responders and the medical team at the hospital who treated Christa like a human and have provided exceptional care to her. We also want to thank thousands from all over the world who sent messages offering prayers and support for Christa."

Pike is alive but not for lack of effort by the state of Tennessee and the US Supreme Court, which were

determined to see her dead. The Supreme Court twice refused to stop her execution—first denying her request for a stay on September 29 without a single noted dissent, then, on the day of the execution, vacating by a 6-3 vote a stay granted by the 6th Circuit Court of Appeals so that the killing could proceed before her death warrant expired at midnight. Republican Governor Bill Lee had already refused to grant clemency.

“Christa’s life has been extraordinarily difficult,” the attorneys wrote. “She survived multiple childhood rapes, which political leaders in this state acknowledge leave lifelong scars. She survived nearly 30 years of solitary confinement and, more recently, escalating restrictive confinement leading up to her execution date.”

In the wake of the failed execution, Lee announced Saturday that Tennessee Department of Correction (TDOC) Commissioner Frank Strada will resign later this month. Strada insisted that the department had carried out its responsibilities “in accordance with the established protocol.” Lee has named former US Attorney Ed Stanton to lead an “independent” review of Pike’s execution, retained by the office of Attorney General Jonathan Skrmetti—the same office that approved the protocol under which she was injected. The review’s aim is to make the protocol work, not to question the barbaric practice of state killing.

Meanwhile, leading Tennessee politicians are calling for her to be executed by other means. Republican US Senator Marsha Blackburn, the favorite to succeed the term-limited Lee, wants to bring back the electric chair, while Tennessee House Speaker Cameron Sexton and other legislators have proposed authorizing the firing squad.

That Pike remains handcuffed and shackled to her hospital bed—her arms severely damaged by the drug meant to kill her, barely recovered from days on a ventilator—is an act of sheer sadism by the state.

“She is the only person known to have survived a complete execution attempt in the U.S.,” her attorneys concluded. “Christa is a survivor and will take recovery one day at a time. We continue to ask the Governor of Tennessee to commute Christa Pike’s sentence to life imprisonment without the possibility of parole.”

Pike’s medical prognosis remains unclear. Lee has so far given no indication that he will commute her

sentence, and the attorney general’s office has not said whether the state will seek a new execution date. Her attorneys are expected to hold a press conference at 11:00 a.m. Central Time on Wednesday.



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