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Interpreter whistle-blower takes free speech award

An interpreter who helped a man who died soon after his release from a police station is to be awarded a top human rights prize.

Yu Shu Lipski is the recipient of this year's Voltaire Award, presented by Liberty Victoria for a distinguished contribution to free speech. She describes her work as being the impartial voice of people without a voice.

On the night of the death of Gong Ling Tang, Ms Lipski was working at the Dandenong police station. Her phone call to a radio station blew the whistle on the police and triggered a coronial inquiry.

Ms Lipski says she has always had enormous respect for police but that night their behaviour was atrocious.

Jane Dixon, QC, president of Liberty Victoria, praised Ms Lipski for her efforts to protect Mr Tang and report the incident. "She has my utmost admiration. It must have been extraordinarily difficult to have acted so courageously."

Ms Dixon said that both in how Ms Lipski tried to protect Mr Tang and then revealed why she had to act was whistle-blowing in its truest sense.

On May 12, 2010, Mr Tang's wife called police to report that he was drunk and at her home in breach of a court order. He was arrested and sent to the lock-up at Dandenong Police Station to dry out. He was disoriented, crying out in pain, and struggling to stand up. He was later bailed, thrown out of the police station and left dying in the rain.

The police did not know that 53-year-old Mr Tang was suffering from cirrhosis of the liver and was bleeding internally. As the night wore on he was in agony as his organs began to shut down.

Ms Lipski said she did not believe he was offered help or medical attention while in custody. "He was subjected to ridicule the whole night," she said.

"What happened that night, how Mr Tang was treated, shocked me," said Ms Lipski. CCTV footage showed him fighting to stand after being bailed. He had been taken outside, barefoot, by two police at 8 pm.

An ambulance was called about 15 minutes later, but it was more than half an hour and a second phone call before it arrived. He was found to be suffering from hypothermia and severe liver failure and died the next day.

Victoria Police expressed "great regret about the circumstances" of Mr Tang's death.

Ms Lipski is the only child of two doctors, who were paid 10 cents a month for complying with China's one-child law.

She met her husband, Jacek Lipski, when he was studying business Chinese at Sichuan University in 1995. They moved to Melbourne the following year and have two children.

She majored in English at the Western University of Medical Sciences in China, holds an Advanced Diploma in interpreting and translation and has a Bachelor of Arts degree with honours in international studies at RMIT University.

When studying to become an interpreter she had to take the children, then six and four, to lectures.

"I have been actively working in legal, medical, educational and social systems, providing interpreting service to government and non-government agencies for the last 11 years. I enjoy my work immensely. I love being the impartial voice of the people who don't have a voice."

Since 1936 Liberty Victoria has worked to foster a society based on the democratic participation of all its members and the principles of justice, openness, the right to dissent and respect for diversity.

Among past winners of the Voltaire Award are Wikileaks and Julian Assange, rights activists Julian Burnside QC, Get Up! and Kate Durham, film critic Margaret Pomeranz, author Arnold Zable and journalists Richard Ackland, Stephen Mayne and Chris Masters.

The Award will be presented by Liberty Victoria to Ms Lipski at the 2014 Voltaire Award Dinner, to be held on Saturday 9 August from 7 pm at San Remo Ballroom, Carlton.

Tickets for the Voltaire Award Dinner 2014 are sold via trybooking on <http://www.trybooking.com/FGXU>

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