

A fast path to a short life How one young woman's fling with heroin came to a tragic, terrible end on Buffalo's East Side

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By Lou Michel

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Amanda L. Wienckowski's story is neither pretty nor unique.

The young woman with wholesome good looks who grew up in the supposed safety of suburbia was a junkie.

To support her heroin habit, she began selling her body.

In December, she disappeared. A little over a week ago, her frozen body was found stuffed inside a trash tote on Buffalo's East Side.

Authorities, awaiting autopsy and toxicology test results, don't yet know how Amanda Wienckowski died, whether of an overdose or at the hands of someone. But there is no question heroin had a significant role in her downfall.

"I want everybody, everybody, to know what has happened to my daughter," said Leslie Brill Fink, who buried her 20-year-old child on Saturday.

Police and friends believe Wienckowski's pathway to heroin was the same as that of an ever-increasing number of young people.

They start out popping prescription painkillers, usually the opiate derivatives oxycodone and hydrocodone, that they find in their parents' medicine cabinets.

When those supplies dry up, they discover heroin is easy to get, and cheap, and soon find themselves injecting the illegal drug into their veins.

"I wish I could say that Amanda's story didn't sound familiar, but the outline sounds very familiar with many other young people," said Dr. Robert B. Whitney, an attending physician at Erie County Medical Center's Chemical Dependency Division.

The problem is getting worse. The number of rehabilitation check-ins in Erie County for heroin and other opiates has risen almost 90 percent in five years -- from 1,362 in 2002 to 2,581 in 2006.

And young people make up a growing number.

Many of the people showing up at ECMC for help with addiction to opiates, Whitney says, are in their late teens or early 20s.

A survey conducted last February at the Renaissance Campus, a residential treatment program for adolescents in West Seneca, showed that its youngest patient to have experimented with heroin was 13.

Frantic parents call ECMC every day seeking advice after discovering their children are taking drugs, Whitney said.

"There are things that can be done, but they're not easy . . . My advice is if they have found on their own they can't stop the drugs, they ought to get professional help," he said.

Friends say that Wienckowski recently talked of trying to change her life, but she didn't get the chance. She disappeared Dec. 5 after she was driven to a house on Spring Street in Buffalo for what authorities believe was a paid sexual encounter.

Adam Patterson told police he drove Wienckowski there after she had asked him for a ride. She had been living at his house trailer on the Tuscarora Reservation in Lewiston after they had met two months earlier in Niagara Falls.

Patterson, who is 22 years older than Wienckowski, admits that he had paid her to have sex with him, but that they later became friends.

After waiting outside the Spring Street house for about two hours, Patterson said, he decided not to wait any longer and drove off. Friends and family never saw Wienckowski alive again.

Three days after Wienckowski went missing, Patterson gave her purse to her mother, who in turn gave it to police.

Inside it was a hypodermic needle. It gave investigators the first clue of the dark and dangerous path Wienckowski had traveled.

As detectives peeled away the layers of Wienckowski's life, they said, they discovered she worked as a prostitute in Niagara Falls and Buffalo.

About a month later, on Jan. 9, a Buffalo police officer investigating a tip found her body inside a trash tote in a church alcove across from the Spring Street house where she was last seen. The man in the house fled out a back door, police said, but was later caught and remains in custody as a person of interest.

For Amanda Wienckowski, it was the end of her troubles, which started long before.

>Path to danger

Amanda grew up in Kenmore, where her family operated a well-known corner tavern, the Bachelors Den, at Delaware and LaSalle avenues.

The family lived next door to the bar, and Amanda was born fifth into a family of 10 siblings, including foster children. In her adolescence, the family moved to Witmer Road in Wheatfield for more room and to become dog breeders. Wienckowski attended Niagara Wheatfield High School and graduated in 2006 with a Regents diploma.

She fell in with a bad crowd and started using drugs when she was in her late teens, family and friends agree.

They also say that, as she fell deeper into her addiction, she realized she was headed for trouble and wanted to do something about it.

A journal she had faithfully kept offers proof. In one of her final entries late last year, she described her addiction as a "disease," according to Matthew Clark, a friend of the family who regarded her as a niece. Wienckowski had taken dance classes at his North Buffalo studio since she was a little girl.

"In between the lines, you could feel her determination. She actually planned to go into rehab," Clark said.

Her friends said she had been talking recently about getting clean.

Joy Vail, a barmaid at Cocktail Bob's -- a corner bar in Niagara Falls where Wienckowski sometimes tended bar -- said the young woman confided in her that she was getting ready to kick her heroin habit.

"She planned to take medicine to help her overcome the drugs. So what? She took a wrong turn in life," Vail said, defending her friend. "She was trying to change. She was young."

As for Patterson, he said that though his relationship started with him paying to have sex with her, he came to see Wienckowski as a troubled soul who needed his help.

"She came to my house looking for a place to sleep after she partied, and I didn't want to be alone," he said. "I'd tell her not to get involved with certain people because she got in trouble when she was with them."

Patterson insists he genuinely wanted to help her kick the drugs and get a fresh start in life.

"We weren't boyfriend and girlfriend," he said.

Wienckowski had a boyfriend, Ryan J. Pasisz, but he is in state prison and also used heroin.

Pasisz, 22, has been in and out of prison five times for parole violations since his 2005 conviction for several Niagara County burglaries. His most recent return to prison was last fall, when he tested positive for heroin.

An acquaintance visited him at the Wyoming Correctional Facility to break the news of Wienckowski's death, Brill Fink said.

Patterson says his generosity toward the girl has been turned against him.

"People are blaming me for her addiction and what happened to her, and that's totally not true," Patterson said, adding that if anyone thinks he was working as her pimp, they are wrong. "I'm not anyone's pimp. Amanda was her own pimp."

But, the question that still burns inside Wienckowski's mother is why Patterson did not wait for her daughter at the Spring Street house.

Patterson said Wienckowski sent him a text message that night and also called him on her cell phone, saying she would need more time before she could leave the Spring Street house.

"I waited two hours," Patterson said. "She just asked me for a ride. That's all."

Brill Fink said she is skeptical of Patterson's story.

"If it is correct that she went there for a sexual act, do you think she would text message him or call him? I don't think so," she said.

Patterson insists that is the truth, and said he is sick over what has happened to Wienckowski.

"I lost a friend," he said. "I feel terrible about it."

He also vowed to testify in any court proceedings against whomever authorities end up charging in the case.

>Plans for the future

Wienckowski intended to move out of Patterson's trailer by Feb. 1, according to Brill Fink.

That's when Carolee Wienckowski, one of Amanda's older sisters, was moving back from Las Vegas and the two sisters were to get a place together.

Wienckowski's plan was to attend Niagara County Community College and pursue a career as a corrections officer, her mother said.

"She was waiting for Carolee to move back to the Wheatfield-North Tonawanda area," Brill Fink said. "She looked up to Carolee, who has a degree in criminal justice. She wanted to be like Carolee."

But time ran out.

Brill Fink is convinced that someone killed her daughter before hiding her body in the trash tote.

Erie County District Attorney Frank A. Sedita III said a cause of death and toxicology results from an autopsy are still pending, though Sedita says efforts to expedite the process are under way.

Brill Fink said credit needs to go to the Lewiston Police Department for its help in the initial investigation.

"They really got the ball rolling. They knew something was wrong. They got the state police involved," Brill Fink said.

And as the investigation moves forward, Wienckowski's loved ones and addiction experts had words of caution for other parents.

Clark, owner of the studio where Wienckowski learned to dance, says that parents, especially in the suburbs, should not be under any illusions that geography can protect their children.

"Sometimes it is more concentrated in those areas where they think it is safe," Clark said of bad influences.

Brill Fink's heartbreak and grief over her daughter have taught her some hard lessons.

"I've realized one thing through this," she said. "Life is too short."

A bank fund has been set up to help cover funeral expenses. Contributions can be made to "Amanda Received Her Wings" -- reflecting her mother's belief that her daughter is now an angel -- at Bank of America branches.

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