

# Mother stands by son in Wienckowski's death

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By Lou Michel

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Antoine J. "Justice" Garner, who has been described as a person of interest in the disappearance and death of Amanda L. Wienckowski, told relatives she visited his East Side home Dec. 5.

The same relatives acknowledged he has a criminal past, that Wienckowski probably went to the Spring Street home for a sexual encounter and that he served time as a teenager for an assault involving a woman.

But they said the 22-year-old man adamantly insists he had nothing to do with the 20-year-old Lewiston woman's monthlong disappearance and death.

"My main focus is that my son doesn't get railroaded and that the right person is charged," Sonya Garner, his mother, said Monday.

She knows the circumstances do not look good, but she said she believes her son when he says he had nothing to do with Wienckowski's death.

Police say there's been "no rush to judgment" on their part.

"The Buffalo Police Department is not in the position to 'railroad' anyone," said Dennis J. Richards, chief of detectives. "In fact, there has been no arrest in the disappearance of Amanda Wienckowski."

During a visit with her son Sunday in the Erie County Holding Center, she said, he told her Wienckowski, whom he only knew as "Summer," had been dropped off at his grandmother's house on Spring Street, where he

had been living, and later left there alive.

Quoting her son, Sonya Garner said: " 'This dude brought her here. She came and left.' "

On Jan. 9, the day Wienckowski's body was found stuffed in a trash tote outside a church across from the grandmother's home, Buffalo police took Garner into custody as a person of interest and also charged him in an Oct. 18 rape involving another woman.

He had spent four years at a juvenile detention facility for assaulting a female when he was 16 years old. Despite that, Sonya Garner and her sister Suzetta Garner say there are several aspects of the Wienckowski case that point away from their son and nephew.

"My son isn't perfect, but there are too many open blanks with this case," Sonya Garner said. "I'm a woman myself and feel bad for Amanda's family, but the truth needs to come out."

Her questions and concerns include these issues:

\*Other people were in the Spring Street house the night of Dec. 5, when Wienckowski visited Garner and, therefore, would have been aware of foul play.

\*Where would Garner hide Wienckowski's body for five weeks before police received a tip the morning of Jan. 9 to check a trash tote placed outside the church.

\*An unidentified man in a white Cadillac with Pennsylvania plates showed up at the Spring Street house Dec. 13, and police have not tracked him down.

"If [my son] killed her, my mom would have heard something, and I would have seen something that night when I picked up my 13-year-old daughter at 10:15 p.m. My mother was baby-sitting her," Sonya Garner said.

She also said her son is acquainted with the woman he is accused of raping Oct. 18, but he denies attacking her.

"[Police] don't even have a rape kit to prove the charges," the mother said, adding that she found it strange that police would happen to have that case to bring against her son only hours after he was identified as a person of interest in the Wienckowski case.

Richards had a quick answer for that question.

"Numerous efforts were made by investigators to have Mr. Garner make himself available to police for questioning," Richards said, "[and] he didn't come in for questioning."

Sonya Garner said if her son had anything to hide, he would not have let police officers into the Spring Street house on Dec. 7 when they came to search for Wienckowski.

Wienckowski's mother, Leslie Brill Fink, had filed a missing person report that day after meeting with her daughter's roommate, Adam Patterson.

Patterson, who has admitted he had a paid sexual encounter with Wienckowski but later opened his Lewiston home to her as a friend, has said he drove her to the Spring Street residence on Dec. 5, at her request.

Police believe Wienckowski, who was addicted to heroin, went to Spring Street for a paid sexual encounter.

Patterson told authorities he waited two hours on the night of Dec. 5 outside the Spring Street residence before leaving, claiming that Wienckowski had text messaged and called him on her cell phone to say she would be delayed.

Police have not said what time Patterson had dropped off Wienckowski at the Spring Street home.

"I would have seen something when I went to pick up my daughter," Sonya Garner said, adding that her son had let her into her mother's home when she dropped off her daughter at about 7:20 p.m. and picked her up at about 10:15 p.m.

She also said that a trash tote reported missing from a Spring Street residence was stolen the week of Dec. 7. Through a tip to police, it was discovered outside the church Jan. 9 with Wienckowski's body inside.

"Where was that tote from Dec. 7 to Jan. 9? Somebody would have smelled the remains of a decomposed body," Sonya Garner said. "My son doesn't have a car or truck to move that tote, and he doesn't have anyone he could borrow a car or truck from."

The cause of Wienckowski's death has not been released, pending autopsy and toxicology results.

Sonya Garner said that despite her son's past problems with the law, he was getting his life in order.

"He'd just gotten a job at McDonald's and was picking up his work schedule when he was taken into custody. . . . He was planning to go to Bryant & Stratton to study law enforcement."

She added that authorities need to thoroughly investigate all aspects of the Wienckowski case to avoid charging the wrong person.

Staff writers T.J. Pignataro and Aaron Besecker contributed to this report.

e-mail: [lmichel@buffnews.com](mailto:lmichel@buffnews.com)