

Parents are on a crusade for the truth

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By Donn Esmonde

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They are on a crusade.

They are on a crusade to prove that their daughter was murdered, and to find out who did it. They have questions that deserve answers.

The troubled daughter whom they say was straightening out ended up dead, naked and stuffed in a garbage tote. They believe, with good reason, that she was murdered. But believing it is different than proving it. This is the nightmarish purgatory in which Leslie Brill and Ken Fink live.

Brill is the mother, Fink is the stepfather, of Amanda Wienckowski. Amanda was the 20-year-old woman found discarded last January on Buffalo's Clinton Street. She had been missing for five weeks, since being dropped off at a house across from where her body was found. The medical examiner said Amanda -- whose hair had been shorn, whose body was bruised and contained traces of the date-rape drug GHB -- died of an accidental overdose.

Her mother and stepfather do not believe it. I talked to them last week at a restaurant near their Tonawanda home.

"She did not jump headfirst into that garbage tote on her own," said Ken Fink, a contractor with a steady gaze. "Nothing adds up. Nobody has been held accountable."

Amanda had long blond hair and sky-blue eyes, but she was not the typical girl-next-door. She was a heroin addict who worked as a prostitute to pay for her habit. She lived with a 42-year-old man who admits he dropped her off that night on Clinton Street. She likely never left the house alive.

One grim but plausible scenario is Amanda went there to turn a trick, stayed to party and overdosed. She was eventually dumped in the garbage tote by dirtbags who did not want to call the cops and deal with the blowback. If it happened that way, it would be wrong, sick and cowardly. But it would not be murder.

Leslie Brill and Ken Fink do not believe it. Maybe it is just the wishful thinking of two loving, grieving parents. But I do not think so.

Their lawyer last week sued for Buffalo's police files. The department will not release the files because the case remains open. It is the latest step by Amanda's parents in a crusade for the truth. Their next move may be exhuming her body for an independent autopsy. They may need to move the ball on their own. With an overload of unsolved homicides, Buffalo police may not be inclined to go full-bore on a suspicious, but officially accidental, death.

There are reasons her parents believe she was murdered. They say Amanda -- who spoke with her mother every day -- had gotten clean, was headed to college and was taking an anti-addiction drug. They say she was lured to the house by e-mails from a man posing as a photographer looking for models. They think that she was held against her will, drugged and killed. A forensic expert told them her bruises are signs of a struggle that prompted heart failure.

Antoine Garner is the man whom Amanda went to see. Police describe him as a "person of interest" in the case. Garner is now in jail, charged with raping a woman seven weeks before Amanda disappeared. He has denied involvement in her death.

"Just because things [look] a certain way doesn't necessary mean you have enough to make an arrest," said Dennis Richards, Buffalo's chief of detectives. "We still are very interested in knowing who was with [Amanda] in the last moments of her life and who deposited her in the garbage tote."

Richards told me that it is no sham investigation, that detectives Noreen Walsh and Mary Evans are on the case. District Attorney Frank Sedita said he cannot prosecute if there is no arrest and no proof of homicide.

Which leaves Amanda's parents in limbo. And on a crusade.

e-mail: desmonde@buffnews.com