

Turn over all the evidence on Amanda

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By Donn Esmonde

May 5, 2010

Give the family what they want.

I cannot see any reason not to.

I cannot see why police would not share files on a case that was cold from the start, and now is nearly frozen. I cannot see why the medical examiner's office -- which may have screwed this thing up -- would not turn over to her family the rest of Amanda Wienckowski.

I cannot understand why all of the people who presumably want the same thing -- to find out what happened to Amanda -- are not pushing in the same direction.

Push turned to shove this week. Results of a second autopsy suggest what many suspected -- that the young woman did not die from an accidental overdose, but was strangled.

Amanda was the pretty, blond-haired suburban 20-year-old who detoured into drugs and prostitution. Her family tried to pull her back. The battle for Amanda's soul ended when her naked, frozen body was found stuffed in a garbage tote in January 2009, across the street from the Buffalo apartment where she was last seen a month earlier.

The medical examiner declared the death an accidental overdose, despite bruises on her arm and neck, despite her shorn hair. The questionable finding undercut the police investigation. The medical examiner's credibility took another hit when the office later revealed -- jeez, sorry we forgot to mention this -- the presence of a date-rape drug in Amanda's body.

Now a second autopsy -- which the family raised \$9,000 to cover -- said the bruises and a possible ligature mark on her neck suggest strangulation. The pathologist cannot say for sure because body parts -- including the hyoid bone in the throat, the key to a strangulation finding -- are missing and presumably in the medical examiner's possession. If so, the ME's office needs to hand them over.

"There is no way you could say this isn't a homicide," said Dennis Delano, the ex-Buffalo cold-case detective who is helping the family -- and whose fight for justice in the Crystallynn Girard case cost him his job.

In service to the cause, Amanda's mother, stepfather and sister endured a news conference Monday that included slides of the dead woman's body -- a sight that brought Amanda's mother to tears.

The family wants Judge Gerald Whalen to order Buffalo police to release case records and the ME's office to give up Amanda's remaining body parts (county officials contend that they have cooperated with the family). The family wants to take matters into their own hands. At this point, I cannot blame them.

They care more about Amanda than anyone else. They refused to accept questionable cause-of-death conclusions and a dead-ended investigation. Their efforts prompted an anonymous donor to put up \$10,000 for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the young woman's presumed killer.

In fairness, I cannot blame overloaded detectives for pulling back on a tough case. Amanda's body was not found until a month after she went missing. Whoever was with her had time to cover their tracks and work on their alibis.

Buffalo police early on questioned a "person of interest," who after Amanda's disappearance faced (and was later cleared of) a previous rape charge. Nothing shook loose. There were 60 homicides in Buffalo last year, 15 this year. Detectives have plenty of official killings on their plate. I can see how a supposed overdose gets shoved to the side.

Given that reality, I see no reason not to give the family -- and those helping them -- the evidence they need. They will take the time and trouble to track down leads and find the truth. It is more, at this point, than anyone else is doing.

The young woman got lost in life. She does not have to remain lost in death.

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