

Her family fights lies with love

 buffalonews.com/news/her-family-fights-lies-with-love/article_4ecc4eb5-6de1-5e6e-9fb5-152c0a2f7865.html

By Donn Esmonde

June 4, 2010

Spare me notion that the family did not care. Dismiss the idea that her loved ones, when she was alive, did not try hard enough to help her.

I knew differently long before Monday night's vigil. But the night -- aside from everything else -- was a demonstration for cynics and know-it-alls and blog-posters about the power of love and the nature of addiction.

More than 30 family and friends of Amanda Wienckowski gathered outside the East Side church near where her body was found two winters ago, stuffed in a garbage tote.

There were older folks and kids in strollers holding balloons and everything in between. They were there in remembrance, and -- in a sense -- they were there in celebration. With each passing week, justice creeps closer. With each passing day, the truth comes sharper into view. The questionable official conclusion -- that Amanda was not murdered, but overdosed -- seems about to topple. With an investigation presumably to follow.

Seeing all of them there reminded me: This case is not dead only because these people kept it alive. Justice still is possible because her family and friends could not live with what they believe is a lie.

"When she was on drugs, all of us would yell at her," said Amanda's sister Mercedese, 15. "Everyone in the family would get so upset."

Amanda's body was found stuffed in the tote on a January morning, her long hair chopped short. Across the street is the house where she was last seen alive, dropped off weeks earlier to likely turn a trick for drug money. Living there -- he stood Monday outside the door -- is a man whom police named a "person of interest" in the case. He was arrested, and later cleared of, charges in an earlier rape.

The medical examiner called Amanda's death an accidental overdose -- despite bruising on her arms and throat, despite the presence in her body of a date-rape drug, despite her bizarre disposal. If not for her family, it would have ended there.

"I want there to be a resolution," said her sister Carolee. "Somebody should be put in jail for this."

It is spooky to speak with Carolee. With her long blond hair and pale blue eyes, she could pass for Amanda's twin.

"It was so unfair, what happened to her," said Carolee. "She was very naive, she got roped in [with drugs] at an early age."

The family questioned the "overdose" finding. They hired a lawyer. They knocked on doors on the street where she was found. They raised money to have her body flown to California for a second autopsy. The California pathologist found evidence of foul play. Dr. Silvia Comparini now is in Buffalo, examining autopsy records and Amanda's body parts that the family legally prodded officials to turn over.

It has been a long, hard battle. But it is no harder than the battle Amanda fought -- with their help -- to free herself from the grip of heroin, to defeat what she called her "disease."

The day she disappeared, she took placement tests for Niagara Community College. Carolee was moving back from Las Vegas. They planned to share an apartment and go to school together.

"She just seemed much better, I could hear it in her voice," said Carolee. "She was not an everyday user. She held a job. She took vacations. She would be clean for months at a time."

Amanda was about to come off the waiting list for a withdrawal drug when she disappeared.

"I really felt like she was ready," said her sister Danielle. "She was so sick of living desperate, of living sick."

It was Amanda's battle, but they all fought it with her.

Now they fight a different battle. Not for her life, but for the truth of her death.

e-mail: desmonde@buffnews.com