

At vigil for Wienckowski, Pridgen vows to help family

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By Patrick Lakamp

December 6, 2010

The Rev. Darius G. Pridgen, the incoming Ellicott District council member, told Amanda L. Wienckowski's family Sunday that he will do what he can to help them find answers about her death.

Pridgen attended a vigil in honor of Wienckowski in front of Buffalo City Hall marking the second anniversary of when she went missing.

Her frozen, naked body was found Jan. 9, 2009, upside down in a plastic garbage tote outside a Buffalo church.

"She didn't place herself in the garbage tote," Pridgen said. "At least we should know who placed her there."

The Erie County Medical Examiner's Office declared her death accidental, caused by an opiate drug overdose. The ruling, long disputed by the family, stalled the police investigation and dims chances prosecutors could win a murder conviction even if a killer is caught, her relatives have said. Since then, Wienckowski's family has been fighting city and county officials in court -- successfully -- to pry loose more information to turn over to their experts.

The remains of the 20-year-old Kenmore native were found in the Ellicott District. Pridgen, pastor of True Bethel Baptist Church, said Wienckowski was found only a couple of blocks from True Bethel's downtown location at 472 Swan St.

"If she was my daughter, I'd want leaders to step up," he said. "This is not political but about fighting very hard to find who did this."

Although not invited, Pridgen said he felt compelled to attend in a show of support for the family.

After the vigil, Pridgen told The Buffalo News he found it "unbelievable" more hasn't been done to at least find out who put Wienckowski in the tote, even if law enforcement can't treat her death as a murder.

Leslie Midzinski, the young woman's mother, thanked Pridgen.

"He's the first one from City Hall who has ever approached me in two years," Midzinski said.

Attorney Steven M. Cohen, who won a recent court victory to get the local medical examiner to release more information, said it could take weeks, even months, before Dr. Silvia O. Comparini, a West Coast pathologist hired by the family, can complete her autopsy on Wienckowski.

The materials were sent to Comparini a week ago, Cohen said.

Wienckowski's remains were exhumed earlier this year and shipped to Los Angeles for a second opinion on the cause of her death. Preliminary results from Comparini's second autopsy suggest Wienckowski was strangled, Cohen said. In addition, there are defensive wounds on the young woman's body, indicating a struggle.

The family held Sunday's candlelight vigil "to shine light in the dark corners of city government and county government," whose officials have "fought tooth and nail" to suppress information about her death, Cohen said.

Lynn M. DeJac Peters, who spent 14 years in prison after her wrongful conviction for killing her teenage daughter, also attended Sunday's 20-minute vigil.

Cohen also represents DeJac Peters in her wrongful-imprisonment suits.

Although the recent court ruling provided a bright spot for Wienckowski's relatives, they're still in pain over her death and by what they call an unnecessary battle to prod law enforcement officials to do more to find out who's responsible for her death.

"I want her back," Danielle Wienckowski, 26, said of her sister Amanda.

"I know that's not possible," Danielle said, holding a photo of her late sister. "I want justice. I want answers. We need law enforcement to step up and do their part."

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