

By candlelight, vowing to solve a death ; 2 years later, vigil calls for truth on Wienckowski

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Sunday marked two years since Amanda L. Wienckowski's frozen, naked body was found upside down in a plastic garbage tote outside a Buffalo church.

How she died remains a frustrating mystery to her family and friends, who marked the anniversary with a candlelight vigil across from 157 Spring St., where she was last seen alive after being dropped off Dec. 5, 2008.

"It has been the hardest two years of my family's life," said her mother, Leslie Midzinski. "We won't rest until we find out the truth."

About 35 people met in the parking lot of New Covenant United Church of Christ before trudging through several inches of snow to the spot on church property where Wienckowski's body was found.

There, while bundled in heavy coats and wool caps, they lighted small white candles and prayed the Lord's Prayer together.

Some of the candles later were deposited in the snow at the base of a Spring Street lamppost, where an attached white dove sign reads, "Rest in Peace, Amanda Wienckowski, age 20."

"We are not going to allow whoever did this to Amanda to get away with it," said Michelle Bliss, Midzinski's sister and Wienckowski's aunt.

The family is seeking at least 250 signatures on a letter to "America's Most Wanted," asking the popular crime-solving television show to profile Wienckowski's case.

"We're hoping someone will come forward with information," Midzinski said. "We have no answers, and it has been agonizing for us."

She and Bliss said they also are seeking donors to help defray the cost of an additional autopsy on Wienckowski.

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 that prosecutors could win a murder conviction even if there is an arrest in the case, her relatives have said.

The family hired Dr. Silvia O. Comparini, a West Coast pathologist, to perform another autopsy on Wienckowski to gain a second opinion. Preliminary results suggest that Wienckowski was strangled, Steven M. Cohen, the family's attorney, said recently.

Cohen, who attended Sunday's vigil, chided the county Medical Examiner's Office, saying that "they play with the facts as they need to."

While the office has refused to declare Wienckowski's death a homicide, it also has ordered that Comparini perform all of the autopsy work by herself, without any assistance, to prevent possible homicide evidence from being compromised, Cohen said.

"It's kind of perplexing isn't it?" the attorney said, adding that the order has slowed Comparini's work.

The autopsy is costing more than was originally expected, and an additional \$4,200 is needed to complete it, Bliss said.

The family has received donations from such individuals as former Erie County Sheriff Michael A. Amico and restaurateur Russell J. Salvatore, and is hoping to raise more. The plan is to mail a letter to businesses and organizations with ties to family members and ask for financial help, Bliss said.

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