

Chasing the sordid story of Amanda Wienckowski's death

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By Staff

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From the moment 20-year-old Amanda Wienckowski's body was found in a garbage tote - - frozen, naked, head down -- in January, 2009, the mystery surrounding her death has riveted Western New York.

"It fascinates people partly because it's the story of someone's fall from grace, a downward spiral," says Buffalo News Reporter Lou Michel, who has covered the story from the start.

He explains: "This is a young woman from the suburbs who, in some photos, looks like the girl next door, but who apparently had a heroin addiction and was believed to be a prostitute. Then, she's found upside down and naked in a garbage tote next to a church. That just doesn't happen very often."

The story has taken many twists and turns, with Wienckowski's family insisting that she was murdered, despite the county medical examiner's autopsy that determined she died of a drug overdose. The family's own medical report found that she was strangled and raped.

Tuesday, Michel was ahead of other media, breaking the latest development in the case on The News' website. His story, posted just after noon, reported that District Attorney Frank Sedita had the results of an evaluation of the two conflicting autopsies -- this from an independent medical examiner who called the cause of death "undetermined."

Michel said the story has been a challenge to report because of the intense interest of other Buffalo-area media. For this story, The News' scoop relied on one of the oldest and most reliable of reporting technique: the tickler file, a simple device that reminds a reporter to check on events. Tuesday, so reminded, he called Sedita, who told him he had the 16-page report in hand and could provide details.

By mid-afternoon Tuesday, Michel had received a call from Buffalo developer Carl Paladino, who offered him an interview with Leslie Brill, the victim's mother, in Paladino's office. Paladino has been helping the family after becoming convinced that the truth was not emerging.

An especially dogged reporter, Michel collaborated with his News colleague Dan Herbeck

on the coverage of the Oklahoma City bomber (and Niagara County native) Timothy McVeigh for The News, and as co-authors of a best-selling book, "American Terrorist," published by HarperCollins in 2001.

With all the unknowns of the Wienckowski story, two things are certain: There's more to come, and Michel's byline will be worth watching.