

Assault trial puts focus on figure in Wienckowski case

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By Patrick Lakamp

January 31, 2013



Antoine J. Garner, “a person of interest” in the death of Amanda Wienckowski, is on trial in 2011 case involving different woman.

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Antoine J. Garner, considered “a person of interest” by police in the mysterious death of Amanda L. Wienckowski, began his first day of trial Wednesday in an unrelated case in which he is accused of choking and assaulting a 43-year-old prostitute.

A prosecutor opened the Erie County Court trial alleging that Garner, then 24, picked up the woman in the early morning of June 26, 2011, at Broadway and Mills Street and drove her to an abandoned house on Jewett Avenue.

She agreed to perform oral sex for money but then grew scared and tried to flee as Garner made more demands, said Rosanne E. Johnson, chief of the Special Victims Bureau of the Erie County District Attorney’s Office.

The tall, heavy-set Garner grabbed her from behind and pushed her into a corner, where he squeezed her neck, Johnson told jurors.

Garner lifted the 5-foot, 4-inch, 135-pound woman off the ground and dragged her upstairs, Johnson said, and she blacked out and woke up on her stomach with the defendant on top of her.

“[Expletive], you’re going to learn the hard way,” Garner said, according to Johnson.

Half-naked, she again tried to escape, but he struck her with a ceramic ashtray and cut her head, Johnson said.

“It’s him,” Johnson said of Garner. “He’s the attacker. He’s the strangler.”

After Garner left the house, the woman staggered out and collapsed on the steps of a nearby home, Johnson said. A neighbor called 911.

Johnson said police found genetic material from Garner and the victim inside the abandoned house, as well as her blood and his fingerprint on a windowpane.

Garner, 26, faces charges of second-degree assault and strangulation in the trial before Erie County Judge Kenneth F. Case.

If Garner is convicted, he could face up to seven years in prison, according to the District Attorney’s Office.

Defense attorney Joseph A. Agro asked jurors to keep an open mind and not to rush to judgment.

Agro, in his opening statement, told jurors that “you’re not going to believe how many issues” will come up in the trial. Of the 66 items of prosecution evidence so far, 49 are photos, he said.

“Don’t assume something happened here just because the pictures are bad,” he said.

“I think, in the end, the pictures will not tell the whole story here.”

The woman’s story will be the key to the trial, he said. “You’re either going to believe her or you’re not,” Agro said.

“We are finally going to be able to break down this woman’s story,” he said, adding that “ultimately, you’ll see the story does not make sense.”

Four years ago, Wienckowski’s frozen body was found upside down in a garbage tote outside a church at Clinton and Spring streets on the city’s East Side, across the street from the home of Garner, the last person known to have seen her alive and who has been described by authorities as a person of interest in the death.

The Wienckowski family believes that the 20-year-old Kenmore woman was murdered and have tried to get the County Medical Examiner's Office to revise the death certificate from an accidental drug overdose to a homicide.

At a Buffalo Common Council committee hearing Tuesday, a spokeswoman for the family told Council members that Dr. James F. Chmiel, an ear, nose and throat specialist, determined that bone and cartilage in Wienckowski's neck was crushed and that she could not have survived that type of injury.

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