

# Murder Victim's Role as Informant A Key Motive in her Brutal Slaying?

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A beautiful 20-year-old with a bad heroin habit and short lived careers as a prostitute and police informant, Amanda Wienckowski disappeared on Dec. 5, 2008. Her frozen, battered and naked body was discovered five weeks later, stuffed into a garbage tote in a seedy neighborhood on Buffalo's East Side.

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Former Niagara Falls Police Officer Ryan Warme was about as bad as they come. A drug dealer who regularly had sex with prostitutes and tipped others in the underworld off to undercover police activity, he was acquainted with Amanda Wienckowski. Might he know something about the circumstances of her death?

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The brief transit and violent eclipse of Amanda Wienchowski left many questions unanswered for her friends and family, who leave candles and other mementos at her grave site.

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Leslie Brill Meserole, Amanda Wienckowski's mother, has spent the last nearly seven years looking for answers in the disappearance and death of her beautiful daughter. The Buffalo City Police Department, Erie County Sheriff's Department, the District Attorney's office and the Medical Examiner's office have been anything but helpful.

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A hulking 300 pounder with a thing for choking women he's raping, Antoine Garner is currently serving 18 years in state prison following his convictions in three separate sex cases. He was named by Buffalo police as a "person of interest" in the Amanda Wienckowski murder but never charged.

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Leslie Brill Meserole,  
Amanda Wienckowski's  
mother.



“This could be the most massive foul up I’ve ever seen on the part of law enforcement or the most massive cover up. But the more I know about it, the more I believe it’s a combination of both.”

Peter A. Reese, the attorney representing the family of Amanda Wienckowski, whose frozen, battered and nude body was found stuffed into a garbage tote on Buffalo’s East Side in January 2009, shakes his head.

““Amanda's death was a homicide and everyone in Western New York knows it, but, for whatever reason, the authorities don’t want to admit it,” he said.

The petite, blonde 20-year-old had the looks of a prom queen and a heroin habit that led her into the dark netherworld of prostitution and work as a police informant. It was a high risk lifestyle that got her killed but, because the Erie County Medical Examiner’s office labeled her death as accidental, it has never been properly investigated.

That job has been left to her mother, Leslie Brill Meserole, whose six year battle to pry loose information about her daughter’s horrific end from recalcitrant officials from the Buffalo Police Department, the Erie County Sheriff’s Department and the medical examiner’s office, all of whom had to be dragged kicking and screaming through court to give up anything at all.

She’s been assisted over the past nearly seven years, on and off the record, by a small army of current and former law enforcement officials, attorneys, journalists and forensic experts can see the obvious: that Amanda was murdered by a person or persons unknown, and that her killer or killers most likely walk among us today.

The basic facts in the case are widely known. Amanda, who graduated from Niagara-

Wheatfield High School in 2006 with a Regents diploma, was tending bar at Cocktail Bob's on Cuddaback Avenue late on the afternoon of Dec. 5, 2008, when she received a phone call from a man later identified as Adam Patterson, who lived with her on the Tuscarora Reservation in Lewiston and was also involved in the drug and prostitution rackets.

He was old enough to be her father and law enforcement sources described him to the Niagara Falls Reporter as her pimp.

Amanda asked another barmaid to cover for her and Patterson arrived shortly afterward to pick her up. Together they drove to Buffalo, where Patterson had arranged for her to trade sex for drugs with a man named Antoine Garner, a hulking, 300-pounder who was later convicted of a sex offense in which the victim was beaten and choked.

According to Patterson, who was waiting out front in his car near the corner of Spring and Clinton streets in East Buffalo, Amanda called and texted him after about an hour to say it was going to take longer than she expected. Incredibly, Patterson told police, he drove away and left her there.

Garner told a different story. He said Amanda stopped by, stayed a few minutes and left. That was it.

Both agreed they hadn't seen her since.

The family reported her as missing and began canvassing the neighborhood where she'd last been seen, putting flyers up on utility poles and asking residents if they knew anything about the young woman's disappearance.

Police initially suspected foul play and questioned both Patterson and Garner. Detectives conferred with the Erie County District Attorney's office, but it's tough to prove murder without a corpse.

Five weeks after she went missing, on the morning of Jan. 9, 2009, police discovered Amanda's body, frozen and stuffed into a garbage tote that had been placed in an alcove at the New Covenant United Church of Christ, directly across Spring Street from Garner's house. Police said an anonymous telephone tip led them to the scene.

According to the pastor of the church, the tote had been placed there sometime during the night, since it would have been noticed the day before. It had been reported stolen a week or so earlier by a nearby resident, police said.

The naked body had been folded in half and put in the tote with hands, head and feet down and bottom end up. Amanda's long blonde hair had been shaved, there were numerous lacerations and bruises, her tongue had been bitten in half and finger marks were apparent on her throat.

Homicide detectives were now certain they had a murder on their hands. Both Garner and Patterson were placed under surveillance. When the body thawed sufficiently an autopsy was performed the next morning. And the story became even stranger than it already was.

The medical examiner's office determined Amanda had died of an accidental heroin overdose. It is difficult to determine how they reached this conclusion, since it was several weeks before the toxicology report came back.

Also unusual was the fact that the autopsy report was signed by no fewer than four medical examiners. A law enforcement source close to the investigation told the Niagara Falls Reporter that there are never four medical examiners on duty at the same time in Erie County.

"I've looked at a lot of autopsy reports, hundreds," the source said. "This is completely unheard of. Very rarely you might find one signed by two ME's, but (Amanda's) was obviously signed by people who weren't even in the building when the autopsy was performed."

Buffalo homicide detectives disagreed with the conclusion that she'd died of an overdose as well. Sources present at the autopsy said an argument erupted between the medical examiners and homicide detectives, who were certain that Amanda had been murdered.

But once the autopsy report was issued, the investigation ground to a complete halt. Police only investigate crimes.

The report made no mention of the abrasions, lacerations and bruises that appeared all over the dead girl's body.

Looking at the same data, Dr. Michael Sikrica, a forensic pathologist from Albany, ruled that the amount of opiates found in the young girl's blood were "innocuous," and that she had died of strangulation.

Dr. Lawrence Kobilinsky of John Jay College, a consultant to attorneys in the areas of forensic biology, serology and DNA analysis for more than 20 years, also concluded that the substances in Amanda's blood were insufficient to cause her death. He did note, however, high levels of GHB, known as the "date rape" drug.

Taking a cue from the Keystone Cops, the Erie County Medical Examiner's office – which had missed the presence of GBH in the initial report – now amended the document to reflect the new findings. Incredibly, the ME's office now said it was the GBH – which it hadn't even noticed in the first place – had likely caused Amanda's death by asphyxiation.

But Amanda's mother, Leslie Brill Meserole, and several law enforcement sources familiar with the case, have another theory about what happened.

Enter Ryan Warne.

Warne was a Niagara Falls City Police officer who often worked narcotics cases. In December 2008, the same month that Amanda went missing, he was arrested by federal agents and charged with a boatload of offenses that included drug dealing and using his police issued firearm in the commission of numerous felonies.

At the time of his arrest, prosecutors said Warne could possibly face the death penalty if convicted on all counts, but a plea bargain resulted in a 13-year sentence for the disgraced cop.

There were several crimes alleged by prosecutors that were not covered in the plea agreement, and charges related to them were dismissed after the sentence was imposed. Those accusations included the alleged rape of two women, forcing a woman to perform oral sex on him while he was on duty and threatening a woman after an attack, saying he would take her to the Tuscarora Reservation and shoot her.

“Amanda said he used to come into Cocktail Bob’s all the time,” Meserole told the Reporter. “She had been working with the city police, the Niagara County Sheriff’s Department and the Buffalo police for a while, making buys for them. She would do anything for Ryan.”

Meserole said she remembers an afternoon during the summer of 2008, when she noticed a strange car parked in the driveway of the house where she and Amanda lived.

“Because of what she’d told me, I knew it was the police,” Meserole said. “I went out and asked them what they were doing and they said they were waiting for Amanda. I told them I would do it, that I didn’t want her involved. They just laughed and she came out and got in the car and they drove off.”

The day before she went missing, Meserole said, Amanda had registered at Niagara County Community College in a number of criminal justice courses. Her daughter’s ultimate aim, she said, was to become a corrections officer.

“She wanted to get away from the life and she loved working for the police,” she said. “She told me they were paying her a lot of money.”

Meserole said she finds Amanda’s involvement with law enforcement during the final months of her short life especially troubling in light of the mountain of mistakes made by investigators once her body was discovered. A law enforcement source familiar with the case doesn’t disagree.

“Did she go to the house to do the deal, and they’d been tipped off to the fact that she was a snitch so they killed her?” The source asked. “I don’t think you can rule that out.”

At the time of his arrest, Warne was specifically charged with alerting drug dealers to undercover police activity. As regulars at Cocktail Bob’s, how well were he and Adam Patterson acquainted? His specific threat to one of his female victims to take her out to the Tuscarora Reservation and shoot her seems especially troubling.

Police might be investigating these questions but for an obviously botched autopsy report, extensively “amended,” that rules Amanda’s death accidental, whether because of a heroin overdose, too much GBH, rough sex or even, at one point, the suggestion of suicide.

So Meserole contacted Warne herself, through the federal Department of Corrections’ Corrlinks email system earlier this year. Initially he was friendly.

“Leslie... What’s up?” the convicted cop wrote.

But when she got specific, asking him about Cocktail Bob’s and whether he knew anyone who might know something about Amanda’s murder, Warne broke off contact.

That Amanda allowed Patterson to drive her to Garner’s Buffalo home on the evening of Dec. 5, 2008, in order to trade sex for drugs is beyond dispute. DNA taken from the young woman’s body belonged to Garner, Patterson, two unidentified men and two unidentified women.

That she met a violent end seems also beyond dispute. Despite the findings of the Erie County Medical Examiner’s office, Buffalo homicide detectives present at the autopsy, Drs. Sikrica and Kobiliski and Dr. Sylvia Comparini, a Los Angeles-based forensics expert who conducted an independent autopsy at the family’s request, agree unanimously on this point.

The other thing that is beyond dispute is the fact that, for the past six years, the ECME’s office, the Buffalo City Police Department, the Erie County District Attorney’s office and the Erie County Sheriff’s Department have done everything in their power to prevent Amanda’s family, and the public at large, from knowing the true facts of the case.

“When someone in government doesn’t want to release information, there is always a reason,” said one law enforcement source familiar with the case. “It could be to cover up an embarrassing mistake, or it could be something darker. And until you find out, you just can’t know.”

For Peter A. Reese and his partners Michael Kuzma and Daire Brian Irwin, who are representing Meserole in finding justice for Amanda, the case has become something of a crusade.

“I have never seen a case with such emotional impact. They say the worst thing that can happen to a mother is to bury a child,” Reese said. “Leslie lost her child first to drugs and the streets, then later to an unspeakably tragic death. Now it appears that the government, which exists solely to serve us all, has compounded her pain by years of needless delays and foot dragging. We need some of the disinfecting warmth of sunshine to clean up this matter.”