

Witness comes forward on 7th anniversary of Amanda Wienckowski's mysterious death

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By Lou Michel

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The frozen body of Amanda Wienckowski, 20, was found in a garbage tote on Buffalo's East Side in January 2009.

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Seven years after Amanda Wienckowski's frozen body was found in a garbage tote outside a church on Buffalo's East Side, her mother says a witness has come forward claiming to have information about her daughter's death.

Leslie Brill Meserole said that Thomas Woodman has told her that he saw Wienckowski's body, still warm, in Antoine Garner's apartment on Spring Street and later frozen inside a tote. He told her that Garner asked him to help him dispose of the body, threatening to harm him if he told anyone.

What's more, Woodman told her that Garner said Wienckowski "got what she deserved."

Meserole believes Woodman's information and other information she has gleaned from police reports she obtained under court order strengthen her long-held belief that Garner killed her daughter and then tried to hide the crime by removing her body from his home.

Woodman showed up unexpectedly at her City of Tonawanda home on Jan. 9, Meserole said. Woodman said he did not come forward earlier because he was fearful of Garner but wanted to speak that day, on the seventh anniversary of when her daughter's body was found, because he was haunted by her death, she said.

Woodman spoke with her and her husband for several hours, Meserole said. While at the home, Woodman also was interviewed over the phone by a private investigator the family hired.

In a brief interview and exchange of text messages with a Buffalo News reporter, Woodman confirmed that he met with Meserole and saw Wienckowski's body twice, once in the apartment and a second time after it was placed in the tote.

"I'm sorry I didn't take it out of the garbage tote," he told a reporter.

Garner, who is in state prison on unrelated charges, has been described as a person of interest in the 20-year-old woman's death, but he never has been charged. Although he was believed to be the last person to see Wienckowski alive, Garner also has vehemently denied harming the woman.

The Erie County Medical Examiner's autopsy concluded that Wienckowski died of "acute opiate intoxication."

But Meserole has cited the results of a second autopsy conducted in 2010 by a West Coast pathologist she hired who determined her daughter was beaten and strangled.

She wants acting District Attorney Michael J. Flaherty Jr. to reopen the case, and cited Flaherty's statement that he is willing to review cold cases. She is not getting far.

"I brought Thomas Woodman to the DA's Office and investigators interviewed him and told me he wasn't a credible witness," Meserole said of a Jan. 11 meeting in downtown Buffalo. "They told me he was involved in his own home invasion out in Clarence with Antoine Garner."

Woodman has a checkered past. He admits having a drug problem. Authorities believe that he had role in arranging Garner's break-in at Woodman's parents' home. And a year ago, he ended up in drug court after shooting a rifle from the second floor of his family's Spaulding Lake home.

But Meserole noted that not every witness has stellar credentials.

Plus, she has other information that she says establishes that Woodman should know something about her daughter's death. Using a court order, Meserole obtained police reports that indicate Woodman was in the company of Wienckowski after she had been dropped off outside Garner's Spring Street residence the night of Dec. 5, 2008. Police records also showed that Garner and Woodman were in contact that night, Meserole added.

What's more, Meserole said police interviewed another witness who observed Garner, a day after Wienckowski disappeared, carrying a rolled up carpet with blond hair dangling from one end of it as he walked toward a garbage tote. Wienckowski had long blond hair.

All of this put together, Meserole said, should be enough for the DA's Office to take a fresh look at the case.

"There is never a wrong time to do the right thing, and if there is any credible evidence, which refutes the findings previously established, we absolutely will take a look at it," Flaherty said.

But he said he was not in a position yet to comment on any conversations Meserole had with his investigators.

The DA's investigators had arranged for a follow-up meeting with Meserole on Jan. 12 and all were in agreement that she would meet the DA's new Homicide Bureau chief and discuss the case.

But Meserole said she canceled the meeting at the last minute because she was "traumatized."

Buffalo Chief of Detectives Dennis J. Richards said that if any new details emerge regarding Wienckowski's death and are brought to the attention of the police, "they will certainly be investigated."

Meserole says her appeal to Flaherty carries additional gravity when considering Garner's criminal background.

Garner, 29, is serving an 18-year prison sentence on three separate convictions – the

Clarence home invasion, the rape of a 16-year-old girl and the choking of a 43-year-old woman until she lost consciousness.

Police have speculated that Wienckowski, a petite woman, possibly died from positional asphyxiation while having sex with a man much larger than her. Retired Homicide Detective Mark J. Lauber, who had interviewed Garner, said detectives at the time believed that Wienckowski was grabbed from behind and an arm was placed against or around her neck while her assailant's full weight pressed against her.

Wienckowski's body was found Jan. 9, 2009, in a stolen tote outside a church across the street from Garner's home. Garner told police he had called her for paid sex in response to an advertisement, but that she later left his home, a claim detectives questioned.

As for listing opiate intoxication as the reason for the death, Lauber told The News in 2013 that detectives disagreed, saying they did not think there was enough heroin in her system. The drug, however, could have caused her heart rate to slow and could have been a contributing factor when taking into consideration compression to her neck.

Those circumstances did not add up to a charge of second-degree murder, Lauber said, though it could result in a lesser charge of criminally negligent homicide or second-degree manslaughter.

Meserole says the severity of the charge does not matter to her, only that Garner be held legally responsible for her daughter's death.

"I believe if Michael Flaherty wants to do the right thing, the undeniable facts are there," Meserole said. "Antoine Garner killed my daughter by strangulation and I want him held accountable."

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