

**OAKLAND COUNTY**

# Wayne County jury awards \$75 million to family of man whose friends gave him drug, recorded death



**George Hunter**

The Detroit News

Aug. 9, 2024 | Updated Aug. 11, 2024, 9:12 a.m. ET

*Southfield* — A Wayne County jury Thursday awarded \$75 million to the estate of a 21-year-old University of Detroit Mercy student who died five years ago after friends reportedly slipped him a heavy dose of drugs and posted videos of his reaction — and death — to social media.

Business major Denis Preka asked a classmate for Adderall on March 19, 2019, to help cram for a test the following day, attorney Mike Morse said during a Friday press conference in his Southfield office.

"Instead, he was given a high dose of MDMA, which is also known as 'Molly,' a dangerous drug that led to his untimely death," Morse said. "In their recklessness and ignorance, his friends watched and recorded Denis' suffering, assuming he was merely tripping, and they posted videos on Snapchat exposing his final moments to the world."

Preka's mother Linda Thom, who appeared at Friday's press conference with her husband Jamie Thom, said watching the videos was difficult. Morse said the family plans to release the videos on the [Denis Preka Foundation](#) website.

"The way Denis died, no one should go through that," Linda Thom said. "What I saw (on the videos) is terrifying."

Linda and Jamie Thom praised their son's friend, a woman who saw the Snapchat videos as they were being posted, and preserved them before turning them over to police. Since the videos were posted in Snapchat's My Story area, they would have been deleted after 24 hours.

Morse said he thought the videos were "possibly the most damaging piece of evidence," during the trial. "Denis suffered for up to five hours that night, and the main defendant in our trial was videotaping it on Snapchat as it was happening ... that was a really emotional, key piece of evidence to show what he was going through," he said.

Morse said he believed Oakland County Prosecutors were pursuing criminal charges in connection with Preka's death. Prosecutors did not respond Friday to a request for comment.

According to the lawsuit, on the night Preka died, he met up with Paul Wiedmaier, a fellow student at Detroit Mercy, and made plans to sleep at Wiedmaier's home in Novi. Wiedmaier's parents were out of town, the suit said.

Preka asked his friend for Adderall or Ritalin to help him study for a test the next morning, Morse said. But Wiedmaier didn't have the drugs, and told Nicholas Remington and Connor Gibaratz about Preka's request, according to Morse.

Morse said Wiedmaier, Remington and Gibaratz gave Preka the ecstasy without telling him because they thought it would be funny to see how he reacted, Morse said.

But Gibaratz's attorney Ben Gonek said his client was cleared of liability at the end of the trial.

"The judge dismissed dismissed the case against Connor Gibaratz as she found there was no evidence to show that he had any liability," Gonek said.

Attempts to reach attorneys for the two other defendants Friday were not successful.

As side effects from the drugs hit Preka, the three men took videos of Preka throughout the night, Morse said. None of them tried to get medical attention as the side effects of the drug worsened, Morse said.

"They delayed calling 911 until it was too late," Morse said.

Preka's cause of death was found to be severe edema and congestion of his brain and lungs from drug intoxication, according to the lawsuit. Preka's parents said they believe he died sometime around 2 a.m., but the lawsuit claims Wiedmaier didn't call 911 until after 9 a.m., saying Preka was having trouble breathing. Preka's body had gone cold when police arrived, according to the complaint.

Preka's parents sued Wiedmaier, Remington and Gibaratz in 2020 and sought \$100 million. The family asserted the defendants failed to intervene on Preka's behalf and to obtain medical help "when it was evident to any reasonable person over a substantial period of time, including while being videotaped, he was in distress and suffering."

Preka's parents have established the [Denis Preka Foundation](#), which keeps alive their son's vision of a nonprofit that funds trips abroad for people with low incomes. His parents said they learned about his plans to start the organization by looking at his computer after he died.

The foundation also is facilitating a "Denis Friendship Bench" project. Linda Thom said she hopes the benches will be installed on high school and college campuses throughout Michigan to encourage young people to eschew social media, and be "real friends, the way we were when I was young."

"In this generation, it's all about the phones and the electronics," she said. "Parents should teach their children that friendship is more than social media. Friendship should be like, Let's have a coffee together, and sit down on the bench together."

Maybe this person is going through hardship; help them. Go through that hardship together."

Jamie Thom warned against the dangers of students taking drugs like Adderall.

"It's a prescription medication, and if it's not yours, you shouldn't take it," he said. "And you're opening up an opportunity for something much more dangerous to happen — especially if you're surrounded by people who would find pleasure and entertainment in watching you suffer by taking something you didn't know you were taking."

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*Correction: This story has been updated to correct the first name of Paul Wiedmaier.*

**OAKLAND COUNTY**

# Parents seek justice for son's death amid claims of prosecutorial misconduct



**George Hunter**

The Detroit News

Nov. 10, 2024 | Updated Nov. 12, 2024, 1:12 p.m. ET

A couple's attempt to get justice for their son's death has devolved into accusations by the grieving parents and Oakland County prosecutors that court proceedings were tainted by prosecutorial misconduct, although the two sides disagree about which public official allegedly committed the offense.

A Wayne County jury in August [awarded \\$75 million to the estate of Denis Preka](#), a 21-year-old University of Detroit Mercy student who died March 19, 2019, after his friends reportedly slipped him a heavy dose of drugs. They posted Snapchat videos of his incoherent spiral into death while mocking him, forcing coffee down his throat and pouring water on his head.

Since the lawsuit was resolved in Wayne County Circuit Court, Preka's parents, Linda and James Thom, have been pushing for criminal charges to be filed against the two men who were found civilly liable for Preka's death — Nicholas Remington and Paul Wiedmaier — and Connor Gibaratz, who was named as a defendant in the lawsuit before the judge dismissed the charges against him.

Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel's spokesman, Danny Wimmer, told The Detroit News the Attorney General's office has received information from the couple and is considering whether to file charges in connection with their son's death, which, according to an Oakland County Medical Examiner's autopsy, was caused by severe edema and congestion of his brain and lungs from drug intoxication.

A month after Preka died, Remington was charged with delivery of a controlled substance causing death, which is punishable by up to life in prison. Remington was incarcerated in the Oakland County Jail in lieu of \$1 million bond, before Oakland County prosecutors dropped the charges in 2022 because they said former Assistant Prosecutor Beth Hand had withheld evidence in the case.

Hand, who was elected Mason County prosecutor in west Michigan Tuesday, did not respond to a phone call seeking comment. Remington's attorney, Neil Rockind, declined to comment.

Gibaratz's attorney, Ben Gonek, pointed out that his client was acquitted in the civil trial and called any allegations against him "nonsense."

"The judge in the civil case found that there was no evidence whatsoever to establish that Connor had anything to do with Denis Preka's death," Gonek said in a text message. "As such, she dismissed the case against Connor."

While Linda and James Thom said they're encouraged Nessel's office is reviewing the case, they said they also want Oakland County Prosecutor Karen McDonald and Assistant Prosecutor Marc Keast to be held accountable for allegedly withholding evidence in the case to return a political favor.

"This case was never about not having enough evidence," James Thom said. "It's about the way the prosecutors messed this case up, which appears to have been done on purpose."

The Thoms last month [started a change.org petition](#) calling for McDonald and Keast to be removed from office because they allegedly "lied to and manipulated (a judge) by withholding evidence" during an April 15, 2021, hearing in Oakland County Circuit Court.

Linda Thom accused McDonald and Keast of dropping the charges against Remington because his attorney, Rockind, donated to McDonald's 2020 political campaign. Rockind [donated \\$7,150 to McDonald in October 2020](#), campaign

finance records show, with his wife donating an additional \$8,325 to the prosecutor in April.

"Before I took office and before Marc Keast was assigned to this case, the prior assistant prosecutor withheld evidence. When we discovered that, we were required to disclose it to the defense attorney and the court," McDonald said in a Monday statement.

"The judge found that the prior assistant prosecutor committed a serious Brady violation and suppressed evidence that was needed to prove our case beyond a reasonable doubt. We were ethically required to dismiss the case.

"Our office operates with the utmost integrity at all times, and the suggestion that campaign donations play any role in those decisions is outrageous."

[During the April 15, 2021, hearing](#), McDonald and Keast said former Assistant Prosecutor Hand had withheld information about messages that were sent from Remington's Snapchat account in September 2019 while he was in jail. Remington's attorney argued the messages showed his client's Snapchat account was not secure and that anyone could have sent the messages and posted the video the night Preka died. The judge agreed and ordered the videos could not be used as evidence.

"Ms. Hand's failure to produce the discovery and blatant misrepresentation to the Court at the preliminary exam, is nothing short of intolerable due process violations," [Valentine wrote in her May 21, 2021, order](#).

## **Parents take claims public**

But Linda Thom said McDonald and Keast hid from Judge Valentine a Novi police report listing geo-tracking data and messages investigators received in November 2019 after sending a warrant to Snap Inc. According to the report, GPS and internet protocol data showed Remington's account was accessed from Gibartz's Northville home on Sept. 26, 2019, along with a message from Remington's account that referenced "letting me use ur Snap."

"These files include inculpatory evidence that clearly shows Connor Gibaratz logged into Remington's account, the Snapchat came from Gibaratz's home address while Remington was in jail, and the communication transcripts between Gibaratz and Snapchat users where Gibaratz admits to using the account," the Thoms wrote on their change.org petition. "Keast withheld all this inculpatory evidence from Judge Valentine and started his journey to get a murderer out of jail."

[According to the Novi police report](#), Snap Inc. provided the messages and geo-tracking data to Novi investigators on Nov. 21, 2019, more than a year before the April 15, 2021, hearing before Judge Valentine.

"You tell me why the prosecutors didn't tell the judge that one of the people who was with my son on the night he died logged into his account to cover for him," Linda Thom said. "The prosecutors were working with the defense attorney because their goal was to release Nick Remington, not to get justice for my son."

[More than 1,600 pages of files](#) the Thoms obtained from Oakland County prosecutors through a public records request have been posted to their change.org page. The records show the Novi police report was part of the evidence package that had been gathered by prosecutors before they dropped the case. The Novi Police Department did not return a phone call seeking comment.

Linda Thom said Hand learned of the Snapchat messages that had been sent from Remington's account while he was in jail because her husband showed the former assistant prosecutor a message on his cellphone that had been forwarded by Preka's friend.

"(Hand) had no way of knowing for sure if that message was real," she said. "It was hearsay information — someone showed her a screenshot of what they said was a Snapchat message. How can they say (Hand) withheld that information, when she hadn't yet verified it?"

During the April 15, 2021, court hearing, Keast told Valentine he had only recently learned from Rockind that Hand, who had worked for former Oakland County Prosecutor Jessica Cooper before voters replaced her with McDonald in November 2020, had hid evidence of the Snapchat messages that were sent while Remington was in jail.

"There was a report that I asked (former Novi Police Detective Sgt. Steve Balog) to author when Mr. Rockind made me aware of (the withheld evidence)," Keast told the judge, according to a hearing transcript. "I asked him if he had written a supplemental report regarding that; he indicated he did not. I told him to write one and send it to me. When he did, I turned it over to defense counsel."

Linda Thom said the supplemental report Keast referenced doesn't exist.

"It's not in any of the files the prosecutor sent us, and we asked for everything that's in the case file," she said. "The prosecutors told us they sent us the whole file, but there's no supplemental reports. I've been asking everyone: Where are these supplemental reports? You go ask them where they are because nobody will tell me."

## **What the video shows**

Preka was a business major who was cramming for a test at his friend Wiedmaier's Novi home the night of March 18, 2019, when Preka reportedly asked for Adderall to help him study.

According to court records, Wiedmaier called Gibaratz and Remington, who police and prosecutors said was a known drug dealer. Remington and Gibaratz allegedly gave Preka MMDA and MDA instead of Adderall, authorities said. According to the civil lawsuit, the men gave Preka the wrong drugs because they thought it would be funny to watch his reaction.

At some point, as Preka began feeling the effects of the high drug dosage, a series of videos were broadcast over a four-hour period to Snapchat from Remington's

account under the screen name "Hulkolas." Since the videos were posted in Snapchat's My Story area, they would have been deleted after 24 hours. But a friend who was horrified after seeing the videos preserved some of them and forwarded them to police.

The videos, which were reviewed by The News, show multiple off-camera people taunting Preka as he succumbs to the effects of the drugs. In one clip, Preka rocks back and forth on a chair with his head thrown back while people cheer, and one man tells him, "This is the best moment of your life, damn it." In another clip, someone pours water on Preka's head.

While the videos were being broadcast, several people sent messages to Remington's account asking what drugs he had given the victim, according to police and prosecutors. The responses: "Methylone some Moll," which are references to MDA and MDMA, or "Molly."

Linda Thom said she doesn't want to release the videos to the public yet because they might taint the case should criminal charges be filed, although she said she'll release the videos afterward, "so the world can see how cruel this was."

Preka died at about 2 a.m. on March 19, although nobody dialed 911 to report the death until 9 a.m., according to the civil lawsuit.

Remington was arrested and arraigned June 12, 2019, in Novi's 52-1 District Court on charges of delivery of a controlled substance causing death.

In setting a \$1 million cash bond with no 10% requirement to get bail, Magistrate Andra Richardson said, "You're on a probation for a drug offense and now someone has died as a result of these drugs. ... I do find you to be a danger to our society and to safety of the public."

District Judge Travis Reeds bound the case over for trial on Oct. 16, 2019. After the COVID pandemic hit a few months later, the case was dormant for months.

After Keast took over the case in January 2021 following McDonald's election as prosecutor and learned that Hand had allegedly withheld evidence, he asked the court in March 2021 to have Remington's bond removed. Judge Valentine ordered the defendant released on a tether.

Nearly a year later, on Feb. 18, 2022, [McDonald sent a letter to the victim's parents](#), informing them of her decision to drop the charges against Remington. McDonald said in the letter the decision was made because Remington's Snapchat account wasn't secure, although the prosecutor didn't mention the allegations against Hand.

Linda Thom insisted justice has not been served.

"My son was murdered, and nobody has gone to jail for it," Thom said. "There's something wrong with our system if someone can get away with murder, and prosecutors can get away with lying. All I know is I'm going to find justice for my son. In this great country, no one is above the law."

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OAKLAND COUNTY

# Snapchat messages scrutinized amid rekindled probe into Novi livestreamed death



**George Hunter**

The Detroit News

Updated Nov. 12, 2024, 11:08 p.m. ET

*Novi* — Snapchat messages are central to the rekindled investigation into the 2019 death of a 21-year-old college student whose friends reportedly slipped him a fatal dose of drugs and streamed videos of his groggy reaction online, the city's police chief said Tuesday.

But it was unclear which law enforcement agency would reinvestigate the case of Denis Preka, who died March 19, 2019 in his friend's Novi home after he reportedly asked for Adderall to help him study for a test, only to be secretly given a high dose of MDMA and MDA, because his friends thought it would be funny, according to court records.

Oakland County prosecutors and the victim's parents, Linda and James Thom, said the first attempt to adjudicate the case in criminal court was marred by prosecutorial misconduct, although the two sides disagree about who allegedly committed the offense.

Prosecutors said they had to drop charges against the man who allegedly supplied the drugs to Preka after learning that a former assistant prosecutor had allegedly withheld evidence in the case.

The former assistant prosecutor, Beth Hand, denied the claim.

"I have never withheld evidence in my entire life, and I never would do that," said Hand, who on Nov. 5 was elected Mason County prosecutor in west Michigan,. "I take my integrity very seriously. I have no idea why I'm being accused of that."

The Thoms last month [started a change.org petition](#) calling for Oakland County Prosecutor Karen McDonald and Assistant Prosecutor Marc Keast to be removed from office because they allegedly lied in court to return a political favor. McDonald has denied the allegation.

A spokesman for Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel told The Detroit News last week the office is considering whether to file charges in the case.

On Tuesday, Novi Police Chief Erick Zinser told The News his detectives resubmitted a warrant to Oakland County prosecutors in the case last month, after getting information from the victim's parents.

"We originally investigated the case (after Preka's death), submitted a warrant request to the prosecutors, and they issued a warrant, it went through the court process, and the charges were dropped," said Zinser, who became police chief in 2022, after the initial police investigation into the death was closed.

"But we took another look at the case after the family brought forth some new stuff, mostly Snapchat information that had to do with the search warrants from Snapchat, and what that contained," the chief said. "We sent that information to prosecutors last month."

Chief Assistant Oakland County Prosecutor David Williams said in a Tuesday statement: "It is our understanding that the (Michigan) Attorney General is reviewing the case. We will provide them with all of the information for their review."

But Nessel spokesman Danny Wimmer said the case is still under the county's jurisdiction.

"While our review of the material provided by the victim's family remains ongoing, the case remains with the Oakland County Prosecutor's Office, and we have neither requested nor been referred the prosecution in this matter," Wimmer said in a Tuesday email.

Linda Thom said she doesn't want Oakland County prosecutors to reinvestigate her son's death.

"I don't trust Karen McDonald," she said. "I don't want her to take my son's case again. I want her to take accountability for getting a murderer out of jail under false pretenses."

## **How the case has evolved**

A Wayne County jury in August [awarded \\$75 million to Preka's estate](#) after finding two of the men who were with him the night he died, Nicholas Remington and Paul Wiedmaier, were civilly liable for the death. Connor Gibaratz, who was also at Wiedmaier's Novi home that night, was named as a defendant in the lawsuit before the judge dismissed the charges against him.

A month after Preka died, Remington was charged with delivery of a controlled substance causing death, which is punishable in Michigan by up to life in prison. Remington, who according to police was a known drug dealer who was on probation at the time of Preka's death, was incarcerated in the Oakland County Jail for more than a year in lieu of \$1 million bond. But prosecutors dropped the charges in February 2022 because they said Hand, the former assistant Oakland County prosecutor, had withheld evidence in the case.

Remington's attorney Neil Rockind declined to comment Tuesday. Gibaratz's attorney Ben Gonek did not return a message seeking comment Tuesday, although he pointed out Friday that the case was dismissed against his client during the civil trial, and called any additional claims against him "nonsense." Attempts to reach Wiedmaier were not successful.

Linda Thom accused McDonald and Keast of dropping the charges against Remington because Rockind donated to McDonald's 2020 political campaign. Rockind [donated \\$7,150 to McDonald in October 2020](#), campaign finance records show, with his wife donating an additional \$8,325 to the prosecutor in April.

McDonald denied the accusation.

"Before I took office and before Marc Keast was assigned to this case, the prior assistant prosecutor withheld evidence. When we discovered that, we were required to disclose it to the defense attorney and the court," McDonald said in a Monday statement.

"The judge found that the prior assistant prosecutor committed a serious Brady violation and suppressed evidence that was needed to prove our case beyond a reasonable doubt," McDonald said. "We were ethically required to dismiss the case. Our office operates with the utmost integrity at all times, and the suggestion that campaign donations play any role in those decisions is outrageous."

[During an April 15, 2021, hearing](#), McDonald and Keast said Hand had withheld information about messages that were sent from Remington's Snapchat account in September 2019 while he was in jail. Remington's attorney argued the messages showed his client's Snapchat account was not secure and that anyone could have sent the messages and posted the video the night Preka died. Oakland County Circuit Court Judge Victoria Valentine agreed and ordered the videos could not be used as evidence.

But Linda Thom said McDonald and Keast hid from Judge Valentine a Novi police report listing geo-tracking data and messages investigators received in November 2019 after sending a warrant to Snap Inc. According to the report, GPS and internet protocol data showed Remington's account was accessed from Gibaratz's Northville home on Sept. 26, 2019, along with a message from Remington's account that referenced "letting me use ur Snap."

According to the Novi police report, Snap Inc. provided the messages and geo-tracking data to Novi investigators on Nov. 21, 2019, more than a year before the April 15, 2021, hearing before Judge Valentine.

"These files include inculpatory evidence that clearly shows Connor Gibaratz logged into Remington's account, the Snapchat came from Gibaratz's home address while Remington was in jail, and the communication transcripts between Gibaratz and Snapchat users where Gibaratz admits to using the account," the Thoms wrote on their change.org petition. "Keast withheld all this inculpatory evidence from Judge Valentine and started his journey to get a murderer out of jail."

## **Hand responds to accusation**

Hand, who left the Oakland County Prosecutor's Office in 2021, said she doesn't know why McDonald and Keast accused her of withholding evidence from Remington's attorney. During the case, Hand said James Thom, the victim's stepfather, showed her a screenshot on his smartphone that was supposedly a Snapchat message sent from Remington's account while he was in jail.

"When the father showed me that Snapchat, I told him to show it to (the former Novi police detective who was in charge of the case), because I'm not an investigator," Hand said. "I then told the detective to follow up on it. The Snapchat message was never in my possession, and I never got anything about it after that. If I would have had evidence, I would've turned it over to the defense."

Zinser, the Novi police chief, told The News Tuesday his detectives are done investigating the case.

"Whatever material was provided to us by Snapchat, we forwarded to the prosecutors," he said. "They have whatever we have."

Zinser said his detectives had not been contacted by investigators from Nessel's office.

"Right now, I thought it was being handled by the prosecutor's office, but if the AG reaches out, we'll talk to them and give them whatever information we have," the police chief said.

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**OAKLAND COUNTY**

# Mother of college student who died on Snapchat still waiting for justice



**George Hunter**

The Detroit News

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More than four months after initiating an investigation, Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel's office is still considering whether to file criminal charges against a man who **allegedly gave drugs** to a 21-year-old college student six years ago and posted the victim's groggy reaction — and death — to social media.

As the case slogs through the criminal justice system, the victim's mother, Linda Thom, said she has asked the Michigan Attorney Grievance Commission and the FBI to investigate her **allegations of misconduct** involving Oakland County Prosecutor Karen McDonald, Assistant Prosecutor Marc Keast and Neil Rockind, the attorney representing the man who allegedly provided the drugs that caused the death of University of Detroit Mercy student Denis Preka.

"It's been six years since Denis was killed, and I still don't have justice because of Karen McDonald and Marc Keast," Thom said. "They need to pay for what they've done."

On Wednesday, the sixth anniversary of her son's death, Thom filed a complaint at the Michigan Attorney Grievance Commission's Troy office asking for an investigation into McDonald and Keast. Thom claimed the pair dropped the case against Nicholas Remington, whom previous Oakland County Prosecutor Jessica Cooper had charged with delivering the drugs that caused Preka's death, because

Rockind and his wife donated thousands of dollars to McDonald's political campaign.

McDonald's office denied the claim and said Remington's charges were dropped because an assistant prosecutor withheld evidence in the case. Rockind did not return multiple messages and phone calls seeking comment.

**More:** [Snapchat messages scrutinized amid rekindled probe into Novi livestreamed death](#)

Preka died March 19, 2019 in his friend's Novi home after he asked for Adderall to help him study for a test, only to be secretly given a high dose of MDMA and MDA, because his friends thought it would be funny, according to court records. Videos were posted to Snapchat showing Preka's disjointed reaction to the drugs while people taunted him, forced coffee down his throat and poured water on his head.

Preka died at about 2 a.m., and by the time police arrived after being called at 9 a.m., his body was cold. An autopsy showed Preka's death was caused by severe edema and congestion of his brain and lungs from drug intoxication. According to the toxicology report, Preka had 80 times more than a lethal dose of MDMA and MDA in his system.

Novi Police investigated the incident and submitted a warrant to the Oakland County Prosecutor's Office. A month after Preka died, former prosecutor Cooper charged Remington with delivery of a controlled substance causing death, which is punishable in Michigan by up to life in prison.

Remington, who according to police was a known drug dealer on probation at the time of Preka's death, was incarcerated in the Oakland County Jail for more than a year in lieu of \$1 million bond. Multiple motions to lower the defendant's bond were denied by four judges and magistrates.

But after McDonald took over as prosecutor, her office dropped the charges against Remington in February 2022 because she said former Assistant Oakland County Beth Hand had withheld evidence, a claim Hand has denied.

In a 2023 civil trial, a Wayne County jury awarded \$75 million to Preka's estate after finding two of the men who were with him the night he died, Remington and Paul Wiedmaier, were liable for the death. Connor Gibaratz, who was also at Wiedmaier's Novi home that night, was named as a defendant in the lawsuit before the judge dismissed the charges against him.

After Oakland County prosecutors dropped the case, Thom asked Nessel's office to charge Remington and the two other men with crimes related to her son's death. In November, Nessel spokesman Danny Wimmer told The Detroit News the office was investigating the case to determine whether to bring charges.

On Monday, Wimmer told The News in a statement: "The Department of Attorney General is investigating this matter. That investigation remains ongoing."

Thom said it's difficult waiting for Nessel's office to make a decision, although she added: "I just want justice for my son, no matter how long that takes — and part of getting justice means also holding Karen McDonald and Marc Keast accountable."

Preka died a day before his birthday. He would have turned 28 years old Thursday.

"Instead of having a birthday party, I had to go shopping for a coffin," Thom recalled. "The baker called me and said the cake was ready. I told him to just donate it."

## **Accusations and denials**

In her letter to the Attorney Grievance Commission, Thom asked that the law licenses of McDonald and Keast be revoked. Thom accused the prosecutors of dropping the charges against Remington because his attorney, Rockind, donated to McDonald's 2020 political campaign. Rockind donated \$7,150 to McDonald in October 2020, campaign finance records show, with his wife donating an additional \$8,325 to the prosecutor in April.

The letter also accused Keast of withholding evidence in court.

"Getting a drug dealer and murderer out of jail by hiding evidence and lying to the court is not prosecutorial discretion, it's a crime," Thom wrote in the 23-page letter that included multiple attachments.

Oakland County Prosecutor's Office spokesman Jeff Wattrick said the accusations against McDonald and Keast are untrue.

"We can unequivocally state that campaign donations did not influence this case, or any other case, handled by the Oakland County Prosecutor's Office," Wattrick said in an email. "Like all elected officials, including other Prosecutors and Judges, Prosecutor McDonald has received campaign donations from numerous individuals, including many attorneys. Prosecutor McDonald's campaigns have always followed campaign finance rules and accurately disclosed its donors.

"At no time has Prosecutor McDonald provided Neil Rockind or any of his clients with preferential treatment nor has she used her office to benefit donors, friends, or special interests in any way," Wattrick said. "The Office of the Prosecuting Attorney is a sacred trust and a public service that Karen McDonald takes seriously. She has always fought for the rights of victims and for a safer Oakland County. She will continue to do so to the fullest extent of the law in every case."

In her letter to the Grievance Commission, Thom wrote that after McDonald became the prosecutor in January 2021, "she appointed Neil Rockind to a committee of defense lawyers that meets with her and advises her."

Wattrick said Rockind was among a group of defense attorneys from whom McDonald solicited input.

"Neil Rockind, along with several other prominent local defense attorneys were invited to participate in this advisory council during the transition in December 2020, well before Prosecutor McDonald was aware of this case.," Wattrick said. "This informal advisory body was not exclusive and does not make policy. It was a vehicle for community input. Additionally, Prosecutor McDonald formed a Law

Enforcement Advisory Council and Racial Justice Advisory Council to provide similar community input. These groups are open forums that continue to meet occasionally."

Thom said she's asked the FBI to look into every case involving McDonald's office and Rockind, although FBI spokesman Jordan Hall did not confirm or deny whether the agency had launched an investigation into Thom's claims.

"As a matter of longstanding policy, the FBI does not confirm or deny the existence of any investigation.," Hall said in a statement. "The FBI receives calls and online tips from concerned citizens on a daily and routine basis. Our policy is to intake all complaints from concerned citizens. The fact that the FBI may have received a complaint from a citizen is not indicative of whether or not the FBI has an open investigation."

Novi Director of Public Safety Erick Zinser told The News he spoke with FBI agents about the case months ago, although he said there's been no recent contact with the federal agency. He later added he is "not aware of any such investigation."

"I don't know how involved the FBI is now, although they reached out to me while the case was still with the county prosecutor looking for information," Zinser said. "I told them what we knew, and that we'd submitted our case to the prosecutor, and that's where it stood."

Zinser added that Nessel's office has not reached out to his department regarding the Novi Police Department investigation into Preka's death.

"I contacted the AG's office last week and asked for an update on where they were, and they said they're still looking into it," Zinser said. "They have their own investigators, but if they need anything from us, we'd be happy to help."

He later said the Oakland County Prosecutor's Office "handled this case appropriately and with integrity."

## Snapchat evidence questioned

During an [April 15, 2021, hearing](#), McDonald and Keast told Oakland County Circuit Court Judge Victoria Valentine that Hand had withheld information about messages that were sent from Remington's Snapchat account in September 2019 while he was in jail.

Remington's attorney argued the messages showed his client's Snapchat account was not secure and that anyone could have sent the messages and posted the video the night Preka died. Valentine agreed and ordered the videos could not be used as evidence.

But Thom said McDonald and Keast hid from Judge Valentine a Novi police report listing geo-tracking data and messages investigators received in November 2019 after sending a warrant to Snap Inc. According to the report, GPS and internet protocol data showed Remington's account was accessed from Gibaratz's Northville home on Sept. 26, 2019, along with a message from Remington's account that referenced "letting me use ur Snap."

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"These files include inculpatory evidence that clearly shows Connor Gibaratz logged into Remington's account, the Snapchat came from Gibaratz's home address while Remington was in jail, and the communication transcripts between Gibaratz and Snapchat users where Gibaratz admits to using the account," the Thoms wrote on a [change.org petition](#) calling for McDonald and Keast to be sanctioned.

In her letter to the Attorney Grievance Commission, Thom wrote: "Keast had plenty of evidence to charge Remington's best friend and eyewitness to the murder, Connor Gibaratz, with obstruction of justice. Instead ... Keast withheld evidence from the Court."

Gibaratz's attorney, Ben Gonek, called the allegations against his client "nonsense."

"The judge in the civil case found that there was no evidence whatsoever to establish that Connor had anything to do with Denis Preka's death," Gonek said Wednesday. "As such, she dismissed the case against Connor."

Hand, who left the Oakland County Prosecutor's Office in 2021, told The News in November that following a hearing, as she walked out of the courtroom, James Thom, the victim's stepfather, showed her a screenshot on his smartphone that was supposedly a Snapchat message sent from Remington's account while he was in jail.

Hand said she instructed James Thom to show the screenshot to the Novi investigator who was in charge of the case. She said the Snapchat message was never in her possession, and that she would have turned it over to the defense if she had had it.

In her letter to the Attorney Grievance Commission, Thom said she reached out to McDonald about Keast allegedly withholding evidence.

"When I never heard back from her and she never acknowledged my email, I came to believe McDonald was behind the dismissal and Keast was doing what McDonald wanted," Thom wrote.

"McDonald and Keast have lied and twisted my son's case just to make me go away, but I am not going away until McDonald and Keast are held accountable legally and publicly for corruption," Thom wrote.

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**OAKLAND COUNTY**

# Parents seek justice for son's death amid claims of prosecutorial misconduct



**George Hunter**

The Detroit News

Nov. 10, 2024 | Updated Nov. 12, 2024, 1:12 p.m. ET

A couple's attempt to get justice for their son's death has devolved into accusations by the grieving parents and Oakland County prosecutors that court proceedings were tainted by prosecutorial misconduct, although the two sides disagree about which public official allegedly committed the offense.

A Wayne County jury in August [awarded \\$75 million to the estate of Denis Preka](#), a 21-year-old University of Detroit Mercy student who died March 19, 2019, after his friends reportedly slipped him a heavy dose of drugs. They posted Snapchat videos of his incoherent spiral into death while mocking him, forcing coffee down his throat and pouring water on his head.

Since the lawsuit was resolved in Wayne County Circuit Court, Preka's parents, Linda and James Thom, have been pushing for criminal charges to be filed against the two men who were found civilly liable for Preka's death — Nicholas Remington and Paul Wiedmaier — and Connor Gibaratz, who was named as a defendant in the lawsuit before the judge dismissed the charges against him.

Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel's spokesman, Danny Wimmer, told The Detroit News the Attorney General's office has received information from the couple and is considering whether to file charges in connection with their son's death, which, according to an Oakland County Medical Examiner's autopsy, was caused by severe edema and congestion of his brain and lungs from drug intoxication.

A month after Preka died, Remington was charged with delivery of a controlled substance causing death, which is punishable by up to life in prison. Remington was incarcerated in the Oakland County Jail in lieu of \$1 million bond, before Oakland County prosecutors dropped the charges in 2022 because they said former Assistant Prosecutor Beth Hand had withheld evidence in the case.

Hand, who was elected Mason County prosecutor in west Michigan Tuesday, did not respond to a phone call seeking comment. Remington's attorney, Neil Rockind, declined to comment.

Gibaratz's attorney, Ben Gonek, pointed out that his client was acquitted in the civil trial and called any allegations against him "nonsense."

"The judge in the civil case found that there was no evidence whatsoever to establish that Connor had anything to do with Denis Preka's death," Gonek said in a text message. "As such, she dismissed the case against Connor."

While Linda and James Thom said they're encouraged Nessel's office is reviewing the case, they said they also want Oakland County Prosecutor Karen McDonald and Assistant Prosecutor Marc Keast to be held accountable for allegedly withholding evidence in the case to return a political favor.

"This case was never about not having enough evidence," James Thom said. "It's about the way the prosecutors messed this case up, which appears to have been done on purpose."

The Thoms last month [started a change.org petition](#) calling for McDonald and Keast to be removed from office because they allegedly "lied to and manipulated (a judge) by withholding evidence" during an April 15, 2021, hearing in Oakland County Circuit Court.

Linda Thom accused McDonald and Keast of dropping the charges against Remington because his attorney, Rockind, donated to McDonald's 2020 political campaign. Rockind [donated \\$7,150 to McDonald in October 2020](#), campaign

finance records show, with his wife donating an additional \$8,325 to the prosecutor in April.

"Before I took office and before Marc Keast was assigned to this case, the prior assistant prosecutor withheld evidence. When we discovered that, we were required to disclose it to the defense attorney and the court," McDonald said in a Monday statement.

"The judge found that the prior assistant prosecutor committed a serious Brady violation and suppressed evidence that was needed to prove our case beyond a reasonable doubt. We were ethically required to dismiss the case.

"Our office operates with the utmost integrity at all times, and the suggestion that campaign donations play any role in those decisions is outrageous."

[During the April 15, 2021, hearing](#), McDonald and Keast said former Assistant Prosecutor Hand had withheld information about messages that were sent from Remington's Snapchat account in September 2019 while he was in jail. Remington's attorney argued the messages showed his client's Snapchat account was not secure and that anyone could have sent the messages and posted the video the night Preka died. The judge agreed and ordered the videos could not be used as evidence.

"Ms. Hand's failure to produce the discovery and blatant misrepresentation to the Court at the preliminary exam, is nothing short of intolerable due process violations," [Valentine wrote in her May 21, 2021, order](#).

## **Parents take claims public**

But Linda Thom said McDonald and Keast hid from Judge Valentine a Novi police report listing geo-tracking data and messages investigators received in November 2019 after sending a warrant to Snap Inc. According to the report, GPS and internet protocol data showed Remington's account was accessed from Gibartz's Northville home on Sept. 26, 2019, along with a message from Remington's account that referenced "letting me use ur Snap."

"These files include inculpatory evidence that clearly shows Connor Gibaratz logged into Remington's account, the Snapchat came from Gibaratz's home address while Remington was in jail, and the communication transcripts between Gibaratz and Snapchat users where Gibaratz admits to using the account," the Thoms wrote on their change.org petition. "Keast withheld all this inculpatory evidence from Judge Valentine and started his journey to get a murderer out of jail."

[According to the Novi police report](#), Snap Inc. provided the messages and geo-tracking data to Novi investigators on Nov. 21, 2019, more than a year before the April 15, 2021, hearing before Judge Valentine.

"You tell me why the prosecutors didn't tell the judge that one of the people who was with my son on the night he died logged into his account to cover for him," Linda Thom said. "The prosecutors were working with the defense attorney because their goal was to release Nick Remington, not to get justice for my son."

[More than 1,600 pages of files](#) the Thoms obtained from Oakland County prosecutors through a public records request have been posted to their change.org page. The records show the Novi police report was part of the evidence package that had been gathered by prosecutors before they dropped the case. The Novi Police Department did not return a phone call seeking comment.

Linda Thom said Hand learned of the Snapchat messages that had been sent from Remington's account while he was in jail because her husband showed the former assistant prosecutor a message on his cellphone that had been forwarded by Preka's friend.

"(Hand) had no way of knowing for sure if that message was real," she said. "It was hearsay information — someone showed her a screenshot of what they said was a Snapchat message. How can they say (Hand) withheld that information, when she hadn't yet verified it?"

During the April 15, 2021, court hearing, Keast told Valentine he had only recently learned from Rockind that Hand, who had worked for former Oakland County Prosecutor Jessica Cooper before voters replaced her with McDonald in November 2020, had hid evidence of the Snapchat messages that were sent while Remington was in jail.

"There was a report that I asked (former Novi Police Detective Sgt. Steve Balog) to author when Mr. Rockind made me aware of (the withheld evidence)," Keast told the judge, according to a hearing transcript. "I asked him if he had written a supplemental report regarding that; he indicated he did not. I told him to write one and send it to me. When he did, I turned it over to defense counsel."

Linda Thom said the supplemental report Keast referenced doesn't exist.

"It's not in any of the files the prosecutor sent us, and we asked for everything that's in the case file," she said. "The prosecutors told us they sent us the whole file, but there's no supplemental reports. I've been asking everyone: Where are these supplemental reports? You go ask them where they are because nobody will tell me."

## **What the video shows**

Preka was a business major who was cramming for a test at his friend Wiedmaier's Novi home the night of March 18, 2019, when Preka reportedly asked for Adderall to help him study.

According to court records, Wiedmaier called Gibaratz and Remington, who police and prosecutors said was a known drug dealer. Remington and Gibaratz allegedly gave Preka MMDA and MDA instead of Adderall, authorities said. According to the civil lawsuit, the men gave Preka the wrong drugs because they thought it would be funny to watch his reaction.

At some point, as Preka began feeling the effects of the high drug dosage, a series of videos were broadcast over a four-hour period to Snapchat from Remington's

account under the screen name "Hulkolas." Since the videos were posted in Snapchat's My Story area, they would have been deleted after 24 hours. But a friend who was horrified after seeing the videos preserved some of them and forwarded them to police.

The videos, which were reviewed by The News, show multiple off-camera people taunting Preka as he succumbs to the effects of the drugs. In one clip, Preka rocks back and forth on a chair with his head thrown back while people cheer, and one man tells him, "This is the best moment of your life, damn it." In another clip, someone pours water on Preka's head.

While the videos were being broadcast, several people sent messages to Remington's account asking what drugs he had given the victim, according to police and prosecutors. The responses: "Methylone some Moll," which are references to MDA and MDMA, or "Molly."

Linda Thom said she doesn't want to release the videos to the public yet because they might taint the case should criminal charges be filed, although she said she'll release the videos afterward, "so the world can see how cruel this was."

Preka died at about 2 a.m. on March 19, although nobody dialed 911 to report the death until 9 a.m., according to the civil lawsuit.

Remington was arrested and arraigned June 12, 2019, in Novi's 52-1 District Court on charges of delivery of a controlled substance causing death.

In setting a \$1 million cash bond with no 10% requirement to get bail, Magistrate Andra Richardson said, "You're on a probation for a drug offense and now someone has died as a result of these drugs. ... I do find you to be a danger to our society and to safety of the public."

District Judge Travis Reeds bound the case over for trial on Oct. 16, 2019. After the COVID pandemic hit a few months later, the case was dormant for months.

After Keast took over the case in January 2021 following McDonald's election as prosecutor and learned that Hand had allegedly withheld evidence, he asked the court in March 2021 to have Remington's bond removed. Judge Valentine ordered the defendant released on a tether.

Nearly a year later, on Feb. 18, 2022, [McDonald sent a letter to the victim's parents](#), informing them of her decision to drop the charges against Remington. McDonald said in the letter the decision was made because Remington's Snapchat account wasn't secure, although the prosecutor didn't mention the allegations against Hand.

Linda Thom insisted justice has not been served.

"My son was murdered, and nobody has gone to jail for it," Thom said. "There's something wrong with our system if someone can get away with murder, and prosecutors can get away with lying. All I know is I'm going to find justice for my son. In this great country, no one is above the law."

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OAKLAND COUNTY

# Snapchat messages scrutinized amid rekindled probe into Novi livestreamed death



**George Hunter**

The Detroit News

Updated Nov. 12, 2024, 11:08 p.m. ET

*Novi* — Snapchat messages are central to the rekindled investigation into the 2019 death of a 21-year-old college student whose friends reportedly slipped him a fatal dose of drugs and streamed videos of his groggy reaction online, the city's police chief said Tuesday.

But it was unclear which law enforcement agency would reinvestigate the case of Denis Preka, who died March 19, 2019 in his friend's Novi home after he reportedly asked for Adderall to help him study for a test, only to be secretly given a high dose of MDMA and MDA, because his friends thought it would be funny, according to court records.

Oakland County prosecutors and the victim's parents, Linda and James Thom, said the first attempt to adjudicate the case in criminal court was marred by prosecutorial misconduct, although the two sides disagree about who allegedly committed the offense.

Prosecutors said they had to drop charges against the man who allegedly supplied the drugs to Preka after learning that a former assistant prosecutor had allegedly withheld evidence in the case.

The former assistant prosecutor, Beth Hand, denied the claim.

"I have never withheld evidence in my entire life, and I never would do that," said Hand, who on Nov. 5 was elected Mason County prosecutor in west Michigan,. "I take my integrity very seriously. I have no idea why I'm being accused of that."

The Thoms last month [started a change.org petition](#) calling for Oakland County Prosecutor Karen McDonald and Assistant Prosecutor Marc Keast to be removed from office because they allegedly lied in court to return a political favor. McDonald has denied the allegation.

A spokesman for Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel told The Detroit News last week the office is considering whether to file charges in the case.

On Tuesday, Novi Police Chief Erick Zinser told The News his detectives resubmitted a warrant to Oakland County prosecutors in the case last month, after getting information from the victim's parents.

"We originally investigated the case (after Preka's death), submitted a warrant request to the prosecutors, and they issued a warrant, it went through the court process, and the charges were dropped," said Zinser, who became police chief in 2022, after the initial police investigation into the death was closed.

"But we took another look at the case after the family brought forth some new stuff, mostly Snapchat information that had to do with the search warrants from Snapchat, and what that contained," the chief said. "We sent that information to prosecutors last month."

Chief Assistant Oakland County Prosecutor David Williams said in a Tuesday statement: "It is our understanding that the (Michigan) Attorney General is reviewing the case. We will provide them with all of the information for their review."

But Nessel spokesman Danny Wimmer said the case is still under the county's jurisdiction.

"While our review of the material provided by the victim's family remains ongoing, the case remains with the Oakland County Prosecutor's Office, and we have neither requested nor been referred the prosecution in this matter," Wimmer said in a Tuesday email.

Linda Thom said she doesn't want Oakland County prosecutors to reinvestigate her son's death.

"I don't trust Karen McDonald," she said. "I don't want her to take my son's case again. I want her to take accountability for getting a murderer out of jail under false pretenses."

## **How the case has evolved**

A Wayne County jury in August awarded \$75 million to Preka's estate after finding two of the men who were with him the night he died, Nicholas Remington and Paul Wiedmaier, were civilly liable for the death. Connor Gibaratz, who was also at Wiedmaier's Novi home that night, was named as a defendant in the lawsuit before the judge dismissed the charges against him.

A month after Preka died, Remington was charged with delivery of a controlled substance causing death, which is punishable in Michigan by up to life in prison. Remington, who according to police was a known drug dealer who was on probation at the time of Preka's death, was incarcerated in the Oakland County Jail for more than a year in lieu of \$1 million bond. But prosecutors dropped the charges in February 2022 because they said Hand, the former assistant Oakland County prosecutor, had withheld evidence in the case.

Remington's attorney Neil Rockind declined to comment Tuesday. Gibaratz's attorney Ben Gonek did not return a message seeking comment Tuesday, although he pointed out Friday that the case was dismissed against his client during the civil trial, and called any additional claims against him "nonsense." Attempts to reach Wiedmaier were not successful.

Linda Thom accused McDonald and Keast of dropping the charges against Remington because Rockind donated to McDonald's 2020 political campaign. Rockind [donated \\$7,150 to McDonald in October 2020](#), campaign finance records show, with his wife donating an additional \$8,325 to the prosecutor in April.

McDonald denied the accusation.

"Before I took office and before Marc Keast was assigned to this case, the prior assistant prosecutor withheld evidence. When we discovered that, we were required to disclose it to the defense attorney and the court," McDonald said in a Monday statement.

"The judge found that the prior assistant prosecutor committed a serious Brady violation and suppressed evidence that was needed to prove our case beyond a reasonable doubt," McDonald said. "We were ethically required to dismiss the case. Our office operates with the utmost integrity at all times, and the suggestion that campaign donations play any role in those decisions is outrageous."

[During an April 15, 2021, hearing](#), McDonald and Keast said Hand had withheld information about messages that were sent from Remington's Snapchat account in September 2019 while he was in jail. Remington's attorney argued the messages showed his client's Snapchat account was not secure and that anyone could have sent the messages and posted the video the night Preka died. Oakland County Circuit Court Judge Victoria Valentine agreed and ordered the videos could not be used as evidence.

But Linda Thom said McDonald and Keast hid from Judge Valentine a Novi police report listing geo-tracking data and messages investigators received in November 2019 after sending a warrant to Snap Inc. According to the report, GPS and internet protocol data showed Remington's account was accessed from Gibaratz's Northville home on Sept. 26, 2019, along with a message from Remington's account that referenced "letting me use ur Snap."

According to the Novi police report, Snap Inc. provided the messages and geo-tracking data to Novi investigators on Nov. 21, 2019, more than a year before the April 15, 2021, hearing before Judge Valentine.

"These files include inculpatory evidence that clearly shows Connor Gibaratz logged into Remington's account, the Snapchat came from Gibaratz's home address while Remington was in jail, and the communication transcripts between Gibaratz and Snapchat users where Gibaratz admits to using the account," the Thoms wrote on their change.org petition. "Keast withheld all this inculpatory evidence from Judge Valentine and started his journey to get a murderer out of jail."

## **Hand responds to accusation**

Hand, who left the Oakland County Prosecutor's Office in 2021, said she doesn't know why McDonald and Keast accused her of withholding evidence from Remington's attorney. During the case, Hand said James Thom, the victim's stepfather, showed her a screenshot on his smartphone that was supposedly a Snapchat message sent from Remington's account while he was in jail.

"When the father showed me that Snapchat, I told him to show it to (the former Novi police detective who was in charge of the case), because I'm not an investigator," Hand said. "I then told the detective to follow up on it. The Snapchat message was never in my possession, and I never got anything about it after that. If I would have had evidence, I would've turned it over to the defense."

Zinser, the Novi police chief, told The News Tuesday his detectives are done investigating the case.

"Whatever material was provided to us by Snapchat, we forwarded to the prosecutors," he said. "They have whatever we have."

Zinser said his detectives had not been contacted by investigators from Nessel's office.

"Right now, I thought it was being handled by the prosecutor's office, but if the AG reaches out, we'll talk to them and give them whatever information we have," the police chief said.

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**OAKLAND COUNTY**

# Mother of college student who died on Snapchat still waiting for justice



**George Hunter**

The Detroit News

March 19, 2025 | Updated March 22, 2025, 10:43 a.m. ET

More than four months after initiating an investigation, Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel's office is still considering whether to file criminal charges against a man who **allegedly gave drugs** to a 21-year-old college student six years ago and posted the victim's groggy reaction — and death — to social media.

As the case slogs through the criminal justice system, the victim's mother, Linda Thom, said she has asked the Michigan Attorney Grievance Commission and the FBI to investigate her **allegations of misconduct** involving Oakland County Prosecutor Karen McDonald, Assistant Prosecutor Marc Keast and Neil Rockind, the attorney representing the man who allegedly provided the drugs that caused the death of University of Detroit Mercy student Denis Preka.

"It's been six years since Denis was killed, and I still don't have justice because of Karen McDonald and Marc Keast," Thom said. "They need to pay for what they've done."

On Wednesday, the sixth anniversary of her son's death, Thom filed a complaint at the Michigan Attorney Grievance Commission's Troy office asking for an investigation into McDonald and Keast. Thom claimed the pair dropped the case against Nicholas Remington, whom previous Oakland County Prosecutor Jessica Cooper had charged with delivering the drugs that caused Preka's death, because

Rockind and his wife donated thousands of dollars to McDonald's political campaign.

McDonald's office denied the claim and said Remington's charges were dropped because an assistant prosecutor withheld evidence in the case. Rockind did not return multiple messages and phone calls seeking comment.

**More:** [Snapchat messages scrutinized amid rekindled probe into Novi livestreamed death](#)

Preka died March 19, 2019 in his friend's Novi home after he asked for Adderall to help him study for a test, only to be secretly given a high dose of MDMA and MDA, because his friends thought it would be funny, according to court records. Videos were posted to Snapchat showing Preka's disjointed reaction to the drugs while people taunted him, forced coffee down his throat and poured water on his head.

Preka died at about 2 a.m., and by the time police arrived after being called at 9 a.m., his body was cold. An autopsy showed Preka's death was caused by severe edema and congestion of his brain and lungs from drug intoxication. According to the toxicology report, Preka had 80 times more than a lethal dose of MDMA and MDA in his system.

Novi Police investigated the incident and submitted a warrant to the Oakland County Prosecutor's Office. A month after Preka died, former prosecutor Cooper charged Remington with delivery of a controlled substance causing death, which is punishable in Michigan by up to life in prison.

Remington, who according to police was a known drug dealer on probation at the time of Preka's death, was incarcerated in the Oakland County Jail for more than a year in lieu of \$1 million bond. Multiple motions to lower the defendant's bond were denied by four judges and magistrates.

But after McDonald took over as prosecutor, her office dropped the charges against Remington in February 2022 because she said former Assistant Oakland County Beth Hand had withheld evidence, a claim Hand has denied.

In a 2023 civil trial, a Wayne County jury [awarded \\$75 million to Preka's estate](#) after finding two of the men who were with him the night he died, Remington and Paul Wiedmaier, were liable for the death. Connor Gibaratz, who was also at Wiedmaier's Novi home that night, was named as a defendant in the lawsuit before the judge dismissed the charges against him.

After Oakland County prosecutors dropped the case, Thom asked Nessel's office to charge Remington and the two other men with crimes related to her son's death. In November, Nessel spokesman Danny Wimmer told The Detroit News the office was investigating the case to determine whether to bring charges.

On Monday, Wimmer told The News in a statement: "The Department of Attorney General is investigating this matter. That investigation remains ongoing."

Thom said it's difficult waiting for Nessel's office to make a decision, although she added: "I just want justice for my son, no matter how long that takes — and part of getting justice means also holding Karen McDonald and Marc Keast accountable."

Preka died a day before his birthday. He would have turned 28 years old Thursday.

"Instead of having a birthday party, I had to go shopping for a coffin," Thom recalled. "The baker called me and said the cake was ready. I told him to just donate it."

## **Accusations and denials**

In her letter to the Attorney Grievance Commission, Thom asked that the law licenses of McDonald and Keast be revoked. Thom accused the prosecutors of dropping the charges against Remington because his attorney, Rockind, donated to McDonald's 2020 political campaign. Rockind [donated \\$7,150 to McDonald in October 2020](#), campaign finance records show, with his wife donating an additional \$8,325 to the prosecutor in April.

The letter also accused Keast of withholding evidence in court.

"Getting a drug dealer and murderer out of jail by hiding evidence and lying to the court is not prosecutorial discretion, it's a crime," Thom wrote in the 23-page letter that included multiple attachments.

Oakland County Prosecutor's Office spokesman Jeff Wattrick said the accusations against McDonald and Keast are untrue.

"We can unequivocally state that campaign donations did not influence this case, or any other case, handled by the Oakland County Prosecutor's Office," Wattrick said in an email. "Like all elected officials, including other Prosecutors and Judges, Prosecutor McDonald has received campaign donations from numerous individuals, including many attorneys. Prosecutor McDonald's campaigns have always followed campaign finance rules and accurately disclosed its donors.

"At no time has Prosecutor McDonald provided Neil Rockind or any of his clients with preferential treatment nor has she used her office to benefit donors, friends, or special interests in any way," Wattrick said. "The Office of the Prosecuting Attorney is a sacred trust and a public service that Karen McDonald takes seriously. She has always fought for the rights of victims and for a safer Oakland County. She will continue to do so to the fullest extent of the law in every case."

In her letter to the Grievance Commission, Thom wrote that after McDonald became the prosecutor in January 2021, "she appointed Neil Rockind to a committee of defense lawyers that meets with her and advises her."

Wattrick said Rockind was among a group of defense attorneys from whom McDonald solicited input.

"Neil Rockind, along with several other prominent local defense attorneys were invited to participate in this advisory council during the transition in December 2020, well before Prosecutor McDonald was aware of this case.," Wattrick said. "This informal advisory body was not exclusive and does not make policy. It was a vehicle for community input. Additionally, Prosecutor McDonald formed a Law

Enforcement Advisory Council and Racial Justice Advisory Council to provide similar community input. These groups are open forums that continue to meet occasionally."

Thom said she's asked the FBI to look into every case involving McDonald's office and Rockind, although FBI spokesman Jordan Hall did not confirm or deny whether the agency had launched an investigation into Thom's claims.

"As a matter of longstanding policy, the FBI does not confirm or deny the existence of any investigation.," Hall said in a statement. "The FBI receives calls and online tips from concerned citizens on a daily and routine basis. Our policy is to intake all complaints from concerned citizens. The fact that the FBI may have received a complaint from a citizen is not indicative of whether or not the FBI has an open investigation."

Novi Director of Public Safety Erick Zinser told The News he spoke with FBI agents about the case months ago, although he said there's been no recent contact with the federal agency. He later added he is "not aware of any such investigation."

"I don't know how involved the FBI is now, although they reached out to me while the case was still with the county prosecutor looking for information," Zinser said. "I told them what we knew, and that we'd submitted our case to the prosecutor, and that's where it stood."

Zinser added that Nessel's office has not reached out to his department regarding the Novi Police Department investigation into Preka's death.

"I contacted the AG's office last week and asked for an update on where they were, and they said they're still looking into it," Zinser said. "They have their own investigators, but if they need anything from us, we'd be happy to help."

He later said the Oakland County Prosecutor's Office "handled this case appropriately and with integrity."

## Snapchat evidence questioned

During an [April 15, 2021, hearing](#), McDonald and Keast told Oakland County Circuit Court Judge Victoria Valentine that Hand had withheld information about messages that were sent from Remington's Snapchat account in September 2019 while he was in jail.

Remington's attorney argued the messages showed his client's Snapchat account was not secure and that anyone could have sent the messages and posted the video the night Preka died. Valentine agreed and ordered the videos could not be used as evidence.

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In her letter to the Attorney Grievance Commission, Thom wrote: "Keast had plenty of evidence to charge Remington's best friend and eyewitness to the murder, Connor Gibaratz, with obstruction of justice. Instead ... Keast withheld evidence from the Court."

Gibaratz's attorney, Ben Gonek, called the allegations against his client "nonsense."

"The judge in the civil case found that there was no evidence whatsoever to establish that Connor had anything to do with Denis Preka's death," Gonek said Wednesday. "As such, she dismissed the case against Connor."

Hand, who left the Oakland County Prosecutor's Office in 2021, told The News in November that following a hearing, as she walked out of the courtroom, James Thom, the victim's stepfather, showed her a screenshot on his smartphone that was supposedly a Snapchat message sent from Remington's account while he was in jail.

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