

OAKLAND COUNTY

Snapchat messages scrutinized amid rekindled probe into Novi livestreamed death



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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 Gibartz'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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