

OAKLAND COUNTY

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



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The Detroit News

Published 5:33 p.m. ET March 19, 2025 | Updated 10:43 a.m. ET March 22, 2025

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."

[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 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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