

Womachka case: Investigators await forensic evidence

Contributed by Elizabeth Larson
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LAKEPORT ‐ Sheriff's investigators hope that technology will offer them another clue in the unsolved murder of a Nice man. {sidebar id=26}

Lt. Cecil Brown of the Lake County Sheriff's Office released a statement Friday to update the community on the investigation into the death of 39-year-old Paul Joseph Womachka.

Womachka was reported missing on June 27 by his ex-wife and business partner, Erica Womachka, as Lake County News previously reported. Two days later, his body was found in his Hey Taxi minivan, underwater in Big Valley Rancheria's marina.

On Friday, Brown reported that sheriff's investigators are waiting for the results of a forensics examination on several pieces of evidence, about which Brown did not elaborate. A previous report explained that the Department of Justice was conducting DNA analysis to identify one or more individuals who may have been present at the time of the murder.

One piece of possible evidence he did share pertained to the minivan itself.

Brown said detectives are working with experts from General Motors to recover any available information from the on-board computer of the van. The computer may reveal details of when and how the van was driven before it entered the lake.

“We're not sure exactly what it's going to tell us yet,” said Brown.

The hope, said Brown, is that the computer will reveal the position of the throttle when the minivan went into the water.

A previous sheriff's office report said the van crashed through a fence before going in the water.

On Friday, Northshore Dive Team members John Rodriguez and Keith Hoyt told Lake County News that they found the minivan in about 9 feet of water. The van was discovered as water depth measurements were being taken for BoardStock.

Hoyt said the minivan was about 10 to 15 feet offshore, and that water weeds had kept the vehicle from moving farther. The windows were down and the minivan was filled with water, with Womachka still inside.

Divers did not remove Womachka's body from the vehicle, said Hoyt. Instead, the van was pulled from the water and tarped, and Lake County Sheriff's investigators had it moved from the scene.

Investigation still lacks rancheria's cooperation

At about midnight on June 27, Womachka received a call from Robinson Rancheria, where he was hired to drive Morgan Matthew Jack, 30, to his home at Big Valley Rancheria.

“He didn't want to take that ride,” Erica Womachka told Lake County News Friday.

Nevertheless, Paul Womachka took the job and never returned home.

After his body was found, an autopsy would confirm that he had been murdered, according to the sheriff's office.

However, the precise cause of Womachka's death has yet to be made public.

Even now, investigators are carefully guarding the information.

Brown said Friday that sheriff's investigators asked him not to comment on the cause of Womachka's death, which he said is too revealing.

“There is going to be some information we're going to hold onto,” Brown said.

Brown said he was not aware of Womachka having received any threats prior to his death. “Everything that I've heard is that he was easy to get along with and not prone to conflict.”

Morgan Jack initially was taken into custody and questioned in connection with the case, since he was believed to be among the last people to see Womachka alive, according to the sheriff's office.

Later, Jack was taken into custody by state officials for a parole violation, and moved to San Quentin for processing.

Since then, state parole officials have released Jack, said Brown.

“He is out of custody,” said Brown, who added, “He has not been cleared from this investigation.”

In early September Brown released a statement in which he explained that the sheriff's office was receiving no cooperation from Big Valley Rancheria in the investigation.

Brown reported at that time that sheriff's investigators had received second-hand information that a number of people at the rancheria had either described the attack on Womachka in detail or claimed to have taken part in it.

He told Lake County News in a previous interview that when sheriff's investigators went to the rancheria to question certain individuals, those people literally ran away or had already gone into hiding.

After that initial public statement, Brown said he received a call from Tribal Chair Valentino Jack, who promised to cooperate with the investigation, including providing rancheria maps to the sheriff's office.

Det. Nicole Costanza has yet to receive that promised information from Valentino Jack, Brown added. Neither have any significant witnesses come forward, Brown added.

“The detectives continue contacting and interviewing people who live in that area but nobody has provided any significant information,” said Brown.

A call Lake County News placed to Valentino Jack's office at Big Valley Rancheria was not returned.

Family searches for answers

Connie Goetz, Erica Womachka's stepmother, said that Paul Womachka's family continues to feel the repercussions of his death.

One of the most disturbing things the family has faced is that Womachka's three sons have been harassed over the

murder by other children at school, said Goetz.

A girl who sat behind one of the boys in class, reportedly the niece of Morgan Jack, laughingly told Womachka's son that her uncle had murdered his father.

"We went right to the police," said Goetz.

Erica Womachka agreed that her sons have been struggling with their father's death at the same time as they've had to deal with the cruelty of some of their peers.

Although she hasn't been threatened, Erica Womachka said she doesn't feel safe since her ex-husband — and best friend — was murdered.

"I do feel that my children are sometimes in danger because of this situation," she said. "How immediate it is, I can't say."

As a result, she is considering leaving Lake County. But she said she wants her sons to help make that decision which, so far, they've been unwilling to do. "They all don't feel like they want to leave."

Womachka said she has been unemployed since the murder, and has been devoting her time to homeschooling her sons. "I am definitely going to need to do something soon," she said.

Because Paul and Erica Womachka were divorced, his next of kin are, technically, his parents, who live in Iowa, Erica Womachka said. She said investigators have been relaying information to the Iowa family members.

Goetz said that Det. Nicole Costanza has made herself available to answer the family's questions, but that investigators have been careful in what they've told the family as well. "They told Erica she may never know the cause of death," Goetz said.

Erica Womachka said she believes local authorities are doing everything they can to solve the case.

The approaching holidays can be a tough time for families suffering a loss. To help deal with that, Erica Womachka said her sons will go back to spend time with their father's family in Iowa, a trip her sons are looking forward to taking.

Looking back at her ex-husband's murder, Erica Womachka said she has a hard time believing that four months have passed already.

Added Goetz, "There's got to be some kind of closure in all of this."

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