

Official: Byrne's footprints point to hypothermia or intoxication

By Mary Callahan, Santa Rosa Press Democrat

A 19-year-old Petaluma woman found dead in the snow near South Lake Tahoe appeared to have taken a wrong turn on New Year's Eve and wandered through the snow a short distance before shedding her winter jacket and coming to rest behind a snow bank, authorities said Monday.

Alyssa Byrne was found dead three days later, her boot prints the only ones in the vicinity. The pattern of the footprints suggested disorientation that may have been caused by alcohol consumption, hypothermia, or both, an El Dorado County sheriff's official said.

"I don't want to speculate," sheriff's Lt. Pete Van Arnum said, though he confirmed authorities have received reports that Byrne had been drinking while in town with friends for an outdoor music festival.

He also noted that advanced hypothermia causes confusion and deteriorating cognition. Victims can become disoriented and lose judgment.

"It was subzero that night and, depending on how long she was out in the cold, that could have affected her," Van Arnum said.

Experts say it's common for those with fatal hypothermia to remove clothing shortly before death because of physiological changes that cause a spreading sense of warmth.

Byrne was attending the three-day SnowGlobe Music Festival at Lake Tahoe Community College when she died late New Year's Eve

or early the next morning.

She had driven to Lake Tahoe the previous Saturday with three friends and was sharing a room with them at the Horizon hotel-casino Stateline.

But on New Year's Eve she got ahead of her friends in a concert crowd and suddenly disappeared about 11pm, telling a friend by cell phone 30 minutes later that she was taking a shuttle bus back to the hotel. They never saw her again, despite earlier reports of saying they had.

On Friday morning, a South Tahoe Public Utility District worker perched atop an elevated truck peered over a 4-foot snow bank and spotted her lifeless body about a half-mile from the college campus.

Byrne was lying about 10 feet off Pioneer Trail, between Al Tahoe Boulevard, which leads to the college campus, and Black Bart Trail, the opposite direction of the hotel.

Authorities said long shuttle bus lines may have caused her to join others who elected to walk back to Stateline – an approximately 4-mile route that would have followed Al Tahoe Boulevard and then turned left along Pioneer Trail, headed northeast. It also is possible she walked through the campus instead of taking a paved path used by others, Van Arnum said.

But her final location indicated she turned right on Pioneer Trail, rather than left, crossed the road, and walked along the road a ways before climbing over a 4-foot berm of frozen snow pushed off the roadway, Van Arnum said.

Her boot prints were visible coming over the berm and heading southwest for about 100 yards along the back side of the snowbank, he said.

“It looked like she was kind of disoriented from the footprints. They kind of wandered a bit,” he said.

She was fully clothed when she died except for her white ski jacket, which was found a short distance away, he said.

Investigators hope a forensic autopsy scheduled Tuesday in Sacramento will shed some light on what happened.

A full toxicology panel would automatically be included, but will be an important investigative tool in Byrne's case. The toxicology tests will be run through an independent lab and could take a full month, Van Arnum said.