

At rally, some question voluntary manslaughter charge against rookie South Whitehall officer

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FULL TEXT

Aug. 13--More than 100 people, carrying signs such as "Let police do their job" and waving Thin Blue Line American flags, gathered peacefully Sunday afternoon near the spot on Hamilton Boulevard where South Whitehall Township police officer Jonathan Roselle fatally shot a man two weeks ago.

Among those participating were people who wanted to show their support for police, people who felt Roselle was wrongly charged with voluntary manslaughter and others who believe the victim, Joseph Santos of Hasbrouck Heights, N.J., was at least partly responsible for what happened.

PHOTO GALLERY: More than 100 people in support of police came out to Hamilton Blvd., in South Whitehall Township near the Comfort Inn Suites Sunday, August 12, 2018, close by where Joseph Santos was shot and killed by South Whitehall Township Police Officer Jonathan Roselle two weeks ago.

(RICK KINTZEL/ THE MORING CALL)

Mike Cepress, of Catasauqua, attended the rally with his rottweiler Bonzo to show support for Roselle. He said he has a number of friends in law enforcement and they've discussed a witness video of the shooting. None of his law enforcement friends questioned Roselle's use of force. At worst, they said, he may have fired too many rounds, he said.

Regardless, Cepress said no one knows exactly what Roselle was faced with when he came face to face with Santos.

"The police officer had direct contact with him," he said. "He looked him in the eyes. He heard what he was saying. He was there giving the individual commands and was completely ignored."

"You can't crucify a police officer when he's trying to do his job," Cepress said.

While he wants to see Roselle acquitted of his charge, he said the South Whitehall shooting can lead to change. He said he thinks police officers should not be alone in a vehicle on patrol.

Peggy Karpeuk, of Upper Macungie, who wore a Thin Blue Line T-shirt and carried a large Thin Blue Line American flag, said she felt bad for the situation Roselle was put in for "the guy's wrongful action."

"In a split second he had to make such a decision on a busy road like this," she said, pointing to Hamilton Boulevard.

Rodney Afflerbach of North Whitehall and Richard Deibert of Catasauqua said their children know to stop what they are doing when an officer directs them to do so.

Afflerbach described the voluntary manslaughter charge as "harsh ... unless we don't know something [authorities] know."

Richard Kehm, 77, of Lower Macungie Township, was dressed in a red, white and blue cowboy hat and shirt and holding #PSPStrong sign in support of state police Cpl. Seth Kelly, who was wounded in a gun battle last November on Route 33 in Plainfield Township.

Dashcam footage of the Route 33 shooting was released last week, and Kehm said it shows how quickly things can escalate when officers are dealing with a person refusing commands and resisting arrest.

"Thank God he was alright," Kehm said. "These guys are really up against it at that moment."

Kehm and his wife Phyllis say they have four relatives in law enforcement, including one in South Whitehall, which

is another reason they wanted to offer their support for Roselle, a rookie officer.

"These officers, they don't know if they are going to be coming home to their families or not," she said.

Richard Kehm said that in addition to having a dangerous job, police officers are unjustly criticized for their actions, which are often captured on cellphone video and posted on social media.

"I don't think I'd be able to do it," he said. "I think I would hand in my badge and gun."

On Tuesday, Lehigh County District Attorney Jim Martin announced Roselle had been charged with voluntary manslaughter, a felony punishable by up to 20 years in prison. Roselle, 33, has been on \$75,000 unsecured bail. He said Roselle, who was hired by South Whitehall police in December, was not justified in using deadly force, given that Santos was not armed or committing a felony and that deadly force was not necessary to prevent death or secure an arrest.

"This was an act of a relatively inexperienced officer who held a subjective fear for his own safety, but he made a decision which objectively was unreasonable in light of the facts," Martin said.

According to authorities, Santos had been jumping on moving vehicles along the 3700 block of Hamilton Boulevard when Roselle arrived.

Several videos shared on Facebook moments after the shooting showed Santos walking away from the stopped police car, then reversing course as Roselle shouts repeatedly for him to get on the ground. The video then shows the officer firing five shots.

In the aftermath, authorities said, Roselle told a fellow officer he "f--d up."

The rally took place at the same time community activists in Allentown held an interfaith service in Allentown to honor Santos, 44, and call for an end to police brutality.

Make the Road PA and other activist groups that have protested the shooting held the event at Resurrected Life Church, Allentown.

The idea of a pro-police rally being held at the spot where Santos died provoked immediate outrage from the NAACP Allentown Branch – which demanded the event be canceled.

Barbara Redmond of the branch decided to go to the rally spot to show support for the Santos family. She said it's "insensitive" to have this rally during their period of mourning "at the location the murder took place."

But organizers said they planned to disband quickly if trouble erupted.

Near the end a shouting match broke out when a woman showed up and told supporters they were supporting a murderer. A man told her she was anti-American. Upper Macungie police arrived to watch over the exchange.

The rally didn't include speakers, but people carried signs and mingled as some passers-by honked their horns in a show of support.

"People can't put themselves into our situation," said retired South Whitehall Sgt. Jeffrey Natysyn. "People who make comments and judgments aren't put in a situation to make a split-minute decision," he said.

The loosely organized rally drew more than 100 people. New Tripoli resident Corey Fatzinger posted the suggestion on Facebook. That led an Upper Macungie Township woman to schedule the rally through a Facebook page called "Support Officer Jonathan Roselle and Our Men and Women in Blue."

At Sunday's rally, Fatzinger said he wanted to support Roselle, whom he said was "wrongly accused."

"He did his job and now he's been hung out to dry, so he needs all the support he can get," Fatzinger said.

He called the charges against Roselle "bulls---."

"If the guy would've got down and listened, he'd still be here today. It's very cut and dry."

A vigil for Santos was held in the same area on Aug. 1. It drew about 100 participants.

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