

About 100 gather at vigil for man shot and killed by South Whitehall police

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FULL TEXT

Joseph Santos was alone when he collapsed Saturday on a patch of grass along Hamilton Boulevard, dead from a South Whitehall Township police officer's bullets.

More than a hundred people stood at that site on Wednesday, praying, wailing and shouting in protest over his death. They were there to support his grieving family. They were there to honor Santos, who was a father and a friend. They were there as people of color who feel their communities are too often targeted by police violence. Most of all, they were there to remember the man who was killed shortly after celebrating birthdays with his family at Dorney Park and Wildwater Kingdom across the street.

"Say his name," someone shouted as the protesters marched down Hamilton Boulevard.

"Joseph Santos," the crowd returned.

The protest was organized by Make the Road PA, which advocates for Latino communities, and other area activist groups, including the NAACP. The protesters held their signs toward passing traffic, chanting against police brutality, before gathering around Santos' friends and family.

Santos' brother looked out at the crowd and asked: Would it have been different if "Joey" was white.

"If he was white, would they have gone a different route?" Luis Santos asked. "Yes," they shouted.

Ruth Santos, who was once married to Joseph Santos, tried to address the crowd but was overcome and collapsed into tears.

In the march down Hamilton Boulevard, she clutched his picture, then knelt with his family around flowers, signs and pictures of Santos at the spot where he lay bleeding Saturday night.

Around 5:45 p.m. that night, a South Whitehall police officer requested backup for a possible "mental issue" after responding to a report of a man interfering with traffic on Hamilton Boulevard by Dorney Park. Witnesses said the man was jumping on moving vehicles, and videos posted on social media show him hanging off a police car.

In a witness' video obtained by The Morning Call, Santos is leaning against a police car, walks away, and then turns around to approach the police car. He does not appear to be armed. The officer is heard saying repeatedly "get on the ground" as Santos moves toward him. The officer then fires five shots and Santos collapses. In the backdrop, roller coasters roar at Dorney Park, where his fiancée, Juliana Valenzuela, frantically searched for him until the park closed, not realizing he had left.

The next day, a friend sent her a video of the shooting. She described Santos' death as "unjustifiable."

The shooting resonated with Yolanda Valentin of Salisbury Township, who attended Wednesday's protest with her husband, Angel, to let Santos' family know they are not alone. She questioned why the officer went for his gun instead of employing a less lethal tactic, and said the shooting makes it hard for Hispanics to trust the police.

"So who do we go to?" she said.

Nasheera Brown, 15, of Allentown, said she didn't expect something like this to happen here. She shares coffee and doughnuts with police occasionally.

"It makes me really want to cry," she said. "It was really wrong what they did. They shot him and it broke my trust

because he was doing nothing wrong. He was innocent. For that to happen somewhere public, where I go, it's really heartbreaking and sad."

Alex Soto of South Whitehall, said she's concerned about her two Latino sons when they are out in public.

"They are still at risk despite my biggest efforts at home, just based on their appearance," she said.

Carol Gonzalez of Allentown said she is sick and tired of seeing police kill people of color "for no reason."

"The climate has been conducive to this type of thing for a while now, and it's not getting any better," she said.

"Until police are called to account for their actions, it's not going to change."

Such shootings, which have prompted sometimes violent protests across the country in recent years, happen because of the "warrior mentality that cops have today," Arty Ravitz, 79, of Easton said. "It's 'shoot first and ask questions later' and it's the worst kind of policing America can have right now."

The Lehigh County coroner's office said Santos died of multiple gunshot wounds and his death was ruled a homicide —meaning he was killed by another person, not that the act was determined to be criminal.

South Whitehall police have not commented on the shooting, which is being investigated by state police. Mark Pinsley, a South Whitehall commissioner who is running for state Senate, said he planned to ask Lehigh County District Attorney Jim Martin to refer the case to the state attorney general's office.

Angel Valentin said it makes sense for a prosecutor with no connection to the county to oversee the investigation. Authorities have not released the name of the officer involved, who is on paid leave.

Five miles from the vigil, at the South Whitehall Township commissioners meeting, police Chief Glen A. Dorney offered his condolences to the Santos family and to his officer, saying, "This has touched more than two people." Many of those touched remained on Hamilton Boulevard until the sun set and the weather cooled. They slowly dispersed, giving Santos' family time to grieve at the scene of his death.

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