

# Shooting victim's partner: I'm praying for the officer. I don't have hatred in my heart.

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## FULL TEXT

An interfaith service Sunday honoring the New Jersey man shot and killed by a South Whitehall police officer grew into a united call for justice and reform as several Lehigh Valley religious leaders took to the pulpit, insisting the country's humanity is at stake.

Roughly 100 people of various ages and races gathered Sunday afternoon at the Resurrected Life Community Church in Allentown to remember Joseph Santos, 44, of Hasbrouck Heights, N.J. Santos was killed by South Whitehall Township police Officer Jonathan Roselle during a July 28 encounter on Hamilton Boulevard outside Dorney Park. The Lehigh County district attorney's office ruled the shooting unjustified. Roselle has been charged with voluntary manslaughter.

Though District Attorney Jim Martin said his investigation did not indicate race was a factor in the deadly shooting, activists and religious leaders point to a flawed system they say is disproportionately violent against people of color.

"What is it about black and brown bodies that elicits so much violence?" asked Larry Pickens, ecumenical director of the Lehigh County Conference of Churches.

Pastor Greg Edwards opened the service by lifting up Santos' loved ones and then reading aloud the names of people killed by police officers across the nation. The long list should disturb anyone, regardless of race, religion or ethnicity, according to Celicia Baxter, senior pastor of New Creation UCC in Palmer Township.

A mother of two boys with another baby on the way, Baxter described the powerful love of a parent and how it should motivate everyone to work toward a world where the humanity of the individual is seen and every person is treated with dignity and respect.

"We want a home where police officers only use deadly force as the absolute last resort, in the most extreme of cases —not as the first resort," she said. "I say this as a white mother of white boys because when one part of the body suffers, we all suffer. Our criminal justice system has no justice until there is justice for all. We are not free, until we are all free."

Rev. Benjamin T. Hailey, a senior pastor of Union Baptist Church, spoke softly to those gathered, encouraging them to think hard about what they feel when they take stock of him: a tall, black man.

"What do you see, when you see me? Do you see a pastor? A man of integrity? Or do you see another one of those black boys and so you need to clutch your purse?" Hailey asked.

"Social engineering has caused us to believe things about one another that are vastly far from the truth," he said.

"If we really search our minds, we'll understand that we're really no different from one another."

Arlene Figueroa, the partner of Joseph Santos and the mother of his daughter, said she's been praying for the South Whitehall police officer charged with shooting him.

"You were the last person to see Joey alive," she said, trembling before Sunday's service. "I don't have hatred in my heart because God ... God gives me strength. And I just pray for you."

Videos taken by eyewitnesses just prior to the shooting show Santos hanging off moving vehicles. When Roselle pulls up to the scene, Santos can be seen jumping on the hood of the police cruiser and splaying himself across the windshield. Figueroa said that behavior is not indicative of the man she knew. Asked if she knew what might

have been happening, she could only say the case remains under investigation. Authorities are awaiting the results of a toxicology test performed at Santos' autopsy.

During the ceremony, a tearful Figueroa described how she and Santos were still incredibly close after a sharing an 18-year relationship and an 8-year-old daughter.

Santos, she said, adored the girl. He would paint her nails and hold tea parties with her and her dolls. Their daughter, Figueroa said, has autism and is still reeling from the death of her grandfather. Figueroa said she's yet to reveal to the girl that Santos was killed. But she knows the time is coming.

Meanwhile, Figueroa said, the healing has been hard.

"I have to tell my legs 'Left and right' every day. They say you heal day by day. But I haven't seen no change yet."

Video of the encounter between Santos and Roselle shows Santos, unarmed, approaching the officer. Roselle can be heard ordering Santos the ground, but Santos continues to walk toward him. Authorities say Santos said "don't do it" as he approached the officer, but didn't comply to Roselle's orders.

Five shots ring out in the video before Santos crumples to the ground.

The Lehigh County district attorney's office has determined the shooting was not justified. District Attorney Martin said the officer had multiple non-lethal tools with him at the time of the shooting, including a taser, a baton and pepper spray.

Roselle has been charged with voluntary manslaughter. Martin, in his announcement, cited the inexperience of the officer, who'd been on patrol only five months, as a key factor in the shooting.

The interfaith service was held at the same time as a pro-police rally organized in grassroots fashion through a Facebook group called Support Officer Jonathan Roselle. The peaceful demonstration was held near where the South Whitehall Township rookie officer shot and killed Santos. The rally has come under some criticism for its choice of a location.

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Credit: Sarah M. Wojcik

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