

Brandon man had several contacts with law enforcement a day before fatal police shooting

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FULL TEXT



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TAMPA —Tabitha Choates could tell her cousin was struggling.

When Sidney Richardson IV came over to her north Tampa home for dinner on Saturday, there was a look in the former U.S. Marine's eye that troubled her.

"Little by little, you could tell his mind was walking away from him," Choates said in her first interview since a Tampa police officer fatally shot Richardson last week. "He was losing focus and things he was saying didn't make sense."

At one point, the cousins prayed together, with Richardson asking God to protect their family's women from rapists. It was a strangely specific plea, but Choates wasn't alarmed. Richardson had been grappling with post-traumatic stress disorder and paranoia, his family said, but he'd never been violent.

But as dinner was cooking, Richardson picked up a machete.

Minutes later, the 48-year-old Brandon man was dead, shot after he barricaded himself inside a bedroom with Choates' 17-year-old daughter.

Richardson's family is now left to wonder what came over the man they knew, and whether police could have gotten the girl out safely without killing a man in the apparent grip of a mental health crisis. They said Richardson was behaving more erratically in the days leading up to the shooting. Records show he spoke to police at least three separate times on the day before he was killed to warn them that people around him were in danger.

"He loved his family," said his son, Sidney Richardson V. "In his eyes, he was protecting us. We tried our best to let him know everything was okay, but in his mind, it wasn't."

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The younger Richardson said he first noticed the paranoia after his father left the military.

Richardson spent a dozen years in the U.S. Marines Corps, six in the reserves and six on active duty, records show. He served in Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2002 and then in Africa, according to friends and family.

In 2008, he received a bad conduct discharge after a court martial found him guilty of larceny or "wrongful appropriation," military records show. Details of the case were not available this week.

Richardson believed he was being spied on, his family said. About two years ago, he called his son and said he had fled to Canada because someone was trying to kill him.

His family and friends never felt unsafe around him, though. He had never been violent and they could usually calm him down when he had paranoid episodes.

"He was kind-hearted, great company and always motivating," said Choates, a mother of three. "If you needed him, he was there for you. The kids loved him."

Richards was officially diagnosed with PTSD about a year ago and had attended some group therapy sessions with other veterans, said his friend, Michelle Williams.

But by last week, at least some family members decided he needed more acute care.

The day before the shooting, a Hillsborough sheriff's deputy responding to a suspicious person call met with Richardson at his apartment.

"Richardson began to tell me that he believed the children in the neighborhood were telling him that they were being controlled by pedophiles," the deputy wrote in a report. The children, Richardson told the deputy, were communicating this through the color of their clothing.

The deputy concluded that Richardson didn't meet the criteria to be taken into protective custody under the state's Baker Act because he wasn't threatening to harm himself or others. The deputy noticed a glass jar with a small amount of marijuana in the apartment and some marijuana cigarettes. Richardson agreed to let the deputy take it. The younger Richardson said the deputy called him and asked about his father's mental health history because he was showing signs of schizophrenia. The deputy suggested he file a petition to have his father committed for a mental health evaluation and treatment.

Richardson wrestled with the decision.

"I called my uncle to make sure I was doing the right thing and he said, 'Yeah, you should do it,'" Richardson said.

But he'd have to wait to file the petition on Monday, when the clerk's office opened.

An hour later, his father showed up at his son's north Tampa apartment. He told his son someone was going to try to hurt him. His son tried to ease his fears.

"It was the worst I'd ever seen him," Richardson said. "Before he left, he was yelling, 'I'm going to the police station and I won't stop until I get some help.' That's the last thing I heard him say."

At about 10:50 p.m., the elder Richardson called Tampa police and told a dispatcher that a woman in his son's apartment complex had been yelling "Rape, please help," for about half an hour. A responding officer knocked on every door of the building. None of the residents the officer spoke with heard anything like what Richardson reported, according to police notes.

About an hour later, Richardson walked into Tampa police's District 2 office on North 30th Street and asked to speak with an officer, preferably a U.S. Marine, records show. The dispatcher referred to Richardson as a "possible" signal 20, or mentally ill person.

An officer who was also a Marine veteran spoke with Richardson, who complained about drugs and prostitution at his son's apartment complex, Tampa police spokesman Steve Hegarty said. The officer sensed that Richardson might have mental health issues and offered to drive him to the VA, Hegarty said. Richardson declined, saying he was fine. The officer let him go because he did not fit the criteria to be taken into custody for the Baker Act, Hegarty said.

The younger Richardson said his father spent the night at a cousin's house. The next day, Choates invited Richardson over for dinner that night.

"To get him out of the house," she said, "and into a loving atmosphere."

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Knowing the stew would take a while to cook, Choates decided to go out for burgers for her kids. She said the trouble began when her husband and uncle, who were also home, suggested to Richardson that they all three make a trip to the store.

Richardson told his family he didn't want to leave Choates' oldest daughter Jess alone. Minutes later, Choates got a call from her husband saying Richardson had become agitated, armed himself with a machete and locked them out of the house. Jess was still inside.

Choates returned and then police officers arrived. She said officers spent about five minutes outside trying to get Richardson to open the door, then let themselves in with a key. Richardson had locked himself and Jess in her bedroom.

Choates said officers spent about 15 minutes outside the door, trying to convince Richardson that they didn't want to hurt him or his family, that they just wanted Jess out safely. Jess would later tell her mother that Richardson had told her to get her phone ready because he was about to kill some people. She said he spoke into an imaginary walkie talkie on his shoulder, asking for backup.

According to the police department's account, Corporal Salvatore Mazza and Officer Juan Hernandez kicked in the door of the bedroom and ordered Richardson to drop the machete. Mazza used his stun gun to try to subdue Richardson, but that didn't work. It is still unclear why.

Officer Juan Hernandez then opened fire.

Standing outside, Choates heard at least five shots, and then her daughter ran out screaming.

"She said the look in (Richardson's) eye was like no other," Choates said. "She said she knew her cousin loved her and was trying to protect her but she was afraid because he was unpredictable at that moment."

The shooting is still under investigation, but in an interview this week, Police Chief Brian Dugan defended the officers' actions. He said officers are trained to de-escalate situations involving unstable people but Mazza and Hernandez had to act fast once they got into the tight confines of the bedroom.

"The girl was in danger," Dugan said. "We couldn't just retreat and give him space. He tried to advance at them, and they couldn't just leave her in there."

The chief said the case is another example of how frontline law enforcement officers are often forced to confront

people in the throes of a mental health crisis.

"The officers did what they had to do, but that doesn't make the outcome any easier to take," he said. "If we don't do something about mental health issues in this country, these situations are going to continue to happen."

Choates said she understands the officers were acting in her daughter's best interest.

"I feel like they did what they needed to do to get my child out of the room and protect her," she said. "The Sidney that everybody knows was not the Sidney shot by police."

Sidney Richardson V said he thinks the officers should have spent more time trying to convince his father to cooperate.

"I just wish there had been more talking, more de-escalating," he said.

The night of the shooting, as he stood crying in front of Choates' house, he had another thought.

"That I wish I'd gotten him help sooner."

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Credit: Tony Marrero

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