

Protesters say security guard Jemel Roberson was proverbial 'good guy with a gun' — but was shot and killed by police, anyway

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FULL TEXT

Between Sunday and Tuesday, the description Midlothian police gave for Jemel Roberson evolved from a “subject with a gun” to “a brave man who was doing his best to end an active shooter situation.”

Though police stopped short of an outright apology, the statement posted from Midlothian Chief Daniel Delaney at midday Tuesday said the department was “completely saddened by this tragic incident” and offered “heartfelt condolences” to the man’s friends and family.

Delaney explained that when the earlier statement was issued, investigators were still figuring out what happened and sorting out “conflicting reports” about the man who was killed.

The latter comments, though, seemingly didn’t stop a growing hue and cry over the shooting by the unnamed police officer of Roberson, who was working as a security guard at Manny’s. Police had responded to reports of gunfire at the bar early Sunday and, according to a lawyer retained by his family, Roberson was subduing a suspect when he was killed.

On Tuesday afternoon, a group of protesters gathered outside the Midlothian police station seeking answers. “We are here to cry justice for Jemel Roberson because he can no longer speak,” said Eric Russell, a police accountability activist with the Tree of Life Justice League.

Though the turnout at the protest in unseasonably cold weather was small — about 20 people showed up — the issues raised were echoed in countless social media postings and in media reports both in the U.S. and abroad. Most focused on race, since Roberson was African-American and the officer who shot him is white, Midlothian police confirmed. Midlothian officials said Tuesday that the officer, a seven-year veteran with the department, has been placed on paid leave and that the Illinois State Police are investigating.

And many observers said the shooting appears to undermine a common perception — endorsed in various forms by National Rifle Association officials as well as President Donald Trump — that having armed guards, or a “good guy with a gun,” is an effective way to stem gun violence.

“The president of the United States, he says the only way to stop a mass shooting is have an armed security guard,” said Russell, standing in front of a group of protesters holding signs that read “Justice 4 Jemel!” and Roberson’s picture. “But I guess what he really meant, ‘as long as that armed security guard is not black.’ ” Russell, who called Roberson a hero, said he considered the shooting a “race issue” and hoped his efforts would start a national conversation about “police crime.”

Delphine Cherry, of Hazel Crest, said she attended Tuesday’s gathering because she wanted the Midlothian officer to be held accountable. Cherry, a member of the Illinois Council Against Handgun Violence, said she’d lost two children to gun violence and believed police had “dropped the ball” by not solving her son’s killing six years ago. “I’m out here today to support (Roberson’s mother), because I don’t want the ball to be dropped on her,” Cherry said.

Russell and other activists called on Cook County State’s Attorney Kim Foxx to prosecute the officer. Foxx’s office could not be reached for comment Tuesday.

Later Tuesday, after the protest ended, Illinois State Police released a statement saying that, according to preliminary findings, Roberson was wearing all black and did not have anything identifying him as a security guard. That contradicts statements from Gregory Kulis, a lawyer who filed a civil rights lawsuit Monday on behalf of Roberson's family, who said Roberson wearing a hat with "security" printed on it.

State police also said the officer shot Roberson after he was given several verbal commands to drop his weapon. Kulis has said witnesses reported that several yelled out to the officer that Roberson was a guard; the state police statement does not address that.

Kulis said that, in addition to security, Roberson worked as a church organist and lived alone on Chicago's West Side. A GoFundMe site set up to help pay for funeral costs said Roberson's "love for God and his family were at the forefront of his life." It said his talents included music and basketball. He attended Lane Tech College Prep.

As for what occurred inside the south suburban bar before dawn Sunday, though, details remain murky.

Officials from the Cook County sheriff's office and Robbins police have said that what started as a verbal confrontation among several patrons escalated when one of them left briefly, returned with a pistol and began shooting.

Four other men were injured in the ensuing exchange of gunfire.

According to Kulis, the attorney, a second man who was working security at Manny's told him that the officer jumped onto the bar and waved an assault rifle before running outside and fatally shooting Roberson.

The second security guard, whom Kulis did not identify, claimed the officer also aimed a weapon at him and that he screamed out, "I'm security! I'm security!" to stop him.

Later Tuesday evening, Robbins Mayor Tyrone Ward addressed a small group of residents assembled at Village Hall, asking them to pray for Roberson's family but saying he couldn't answer questions because of the ongoing investigation.

"Any time you lose a young person, it's difficult. It's very difficult," Ward said. "Having a son of my own, being a black man with a black son in a predominantly black town, you get it. You understand the dynamics of what's going on ..."

He did not criticize the Midlothian police officer's actions but did say things might have turned out differently had it been a Robbins officer who encountered Roberson.

"Honestly, I wish it would have been one of our guys who came across that situation," he said. "Why? Because they may have been more familiar with security."

Ward spoke at what was supposed to be a regularly scheduled gathering of the village board. But the meeting was canceled when none of the trustees showed up. Ward said he wasn't sure if the absences were connected to the shooting.

Though shootings of security guards and off-duty police officers by law enforcement are fairly rare, they have happened.

In 2009, an off-duty black New York City police officer wearing street clothes and holding his service weapon was shot and killed by police as he chased a man who had broken into his car.

In that same year, undercover officers in Brooklyn, N.Y., responding to a report of a bar fight shot and killed a 43-year-old security guard who, police said, pointed a gun at them.

A year earlier, in White Plains, N.Y., a black off-duty Mount Vernon officer who was holding an assault suspect at gunpoint was fatally shot by a Westchester County officer.

A 73-year-old night watchman at a recycling center was fatally shot by officers in 2012 in Florida after they spotted him carrying a gun when they arrived in response to a call of an intruder. Police later said the man was not wearing anything that identified him as a security guard.

And in 2000, an off-duty black police sergeant in Rhode Island was shot and killed by two uniformed colleagues as he tried to break up a fight in a parking lot.

Chicago Tribune's Matthew Walberg and John Keilman, Southtown's Mike Nolan and The Associated Press contributed.

DETAILS

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