

Robbins pastors call for justice in Jemel Roberson shooting, pray for family

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FULL TEXT

A bevy of activists, religious leaders and politicians have held a flurry of press conferences, protests and vigils in response to the controversial police shooting of security guard Jemel Roberson in the week since his death. One group that has thus far remained on the sideline stepped forward Sunday to show its support for Roberson's family and call for justice to be served.

"A lot of us from Robbins, we haven't been visual, and we wanted to come out and be able to show the family and the world that the pastors that pastor in Robbins are supporting this family 100 percent," the Rev. Calvin Watkins of St. John Community Church said.

Watkins and the leaders of several other Robbins churches gathered Sunday outside of St. John, 13436 S. Harding Ave., to pray for Roberson's family and assure the community they would not stay silent, "while our brothers, our sons and our husbands and all our loved ones is being slaughtered for no reason in the street."

"We wanted to show that Robbins is here," the Rev. Kenneth Orr of Real Love Ministries International Church in Robbins said. "Because this happened in our community."

Watkins said Roberson, an organist and drummer who played for churches throughout the Chicago area, made multiple stops in Robbins over the years, including playing in a musical at St. John about a year ago.

"He was really, really a great guy, great smile, and the fact that he was working for the church and then he was working security says to me that he wanted to take care of his family," Watkins said.

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Roberson, 26, of Chicago, had been working security at Manny's Blue Room in Robbins in the early morning hours of Nov. 11 when a fight broke out between two groups of men and shots were fired.

Police from multiple local departments responded to the shooting, including a white officer from neighboring Midlothian, who shot Roberson, who was black, as he held one of the suspected bar shooters at gunpoint.

According to a preliminary Illinois State Police investigation into the shooting that cited "witness statements," the officer gave "multiple verbal commands" to Roberson to drop his gun and get on the ground before shooting him. The preliminary report also said Roberson was wearing "plain black clothing with no markings readily identifying him as a Security Guard."

Witnesses, however, have contradicted that account, saying that the officer opened fire on Roberson before giving him an adequate opportunity to respond to his verbal commands. They also reported that Roberson was wearing clothing clearly marked with the word "Security."

The Midlothian Police Department has remained largely mum on the incident and has not responded to requests for comment, but did release a statement last week expressing sympathy for Roberson's family.

"The Midlothian Police Department is completely saddened by this tragic incident and we give our heartfelt condolences to Jemel, his mother, his entire family and his friends," the department said in its statement, which called the shooting, "the equivalent of a 'blue on blue,' friendly fire incident."

The department has not released, nor been willing to confirm, the name of the officer who shot Roberson, but has said he was placed on paid administrative leave pending the outcome of the Illinois State Police's investigation of the incident.

Watkins on Sunday offered prayers both for Roberson's family and for the officer's family, but said he believed justice would be served only if the officer was terminated and charged criminally for the shooting.

"An innocent life was lost all because someone went overboard," he said. "How many children do we have to lose because someone goes overboard? How many children do we have to lose because someone misjudged a situation?"

"So we come today and we say we need justice to be done. On behalf of all of our community leaders in Robbins, all of our block club presidents, we want justice to be done."

Going forward, Watkins said the church community in Robbins would follow Roberson's case "every step of the way" to ensure the family gets the justice it deserves.

"He died saving lives," Watkins said. "He gave his life to save somebody else's life, so it's important that we bring that point out and let everybody know."

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