

Family stunned by man's death; They lost him during birthday trip to Dorney Park, didn't know what happened until next day

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FULL TEXT

HASBROUCK HEIGHTS, N.J. - Joseph Santos and his fiancée joined relatives Saturday at Dorney Park and Wildwater Kingdom for a birthday celebration.

By the end of the day, Santos, 44, was dead - struck down by multiple shots from a South Whitehall Township police officer's gun. His girlfriend, Juliana Valenzuela, unaware he had left the park, became increasingly frantic to find him, as roller coasters and their riders roared and shrieked overhead. When the park closed, Valenzuela filed a missing persons report with park security and drove home to New Jersey wracked with worry.

"I was crying," Valenzuela said. "My stomach turned."

Certain something was wrong, Valenzuela called the hospital she and her sons passed on Interstate 78, but no one there could ease her fear.

It wasn't until Sunday morning that Valenzuela learned of the shooting. A co-worker sent her a witness' video, by then going viral across the internet, and she saw what had happened to the man she called her sweetheart and best friend.

Valenzuela said she spent the next two days crying, mourning Santos. But speaking on the steps of the apartment they shared in Hasbrouck Heights, N.J., with her three teenage sons, two whose birthdays they were celebrating at Dorney Park, her grief was masked by a stoic determination to find justice for Santos, whose killing, she said, was unjustifiable.

"You don't shoot someone multiple times in the stomach and drop him when he has his hands in the air," Valenzuela said.

A South Whitehall Township police officer, responding to a report of a person interfering with traffic, encountered Santos around 5:45 p.m. on Hamilton Boulevard across from Dorney Park. Witnesses said he was jumping on moving vehicles and hanging onto the police car before the officer stopped.

In videos, he is seen walking away from the police car, then reversing course and walking toward the officer, who is heard demanding that he "get on the ground." Santos, who did not appear to be armed, can be seen raising a hand, then lowering it before five shots ring out and he collapses.

Santos' sister, Iris Guzman, who lives in Reading, said she can't imagine her brother so out of control, as witnesses described. She knew him as funny, outgoing and affectionate. She acknowledged he dealt with drug issues in the past but said he wasn't known for bizarre behavior and didn't have mental health issues.

Santos worked at a number of part-time and seasonal jobs in warehouses and on construction sites, Valenzuela said, but struggled to overcome others' judgments about his looks.

"People look at you and they stereotype you," Valenzuela said of Santos, a burly, bearded and tattooed man. "In reality, he was a real good person."

Luis Santos said his brother's view of the world was shaped by the impact of drug use on those around him.

"We live in a drug-infested area," Luis Santos said of the downtown Paterson, N.J., neighborhood where Joseph,

Luis and Guzman grew up blocks from the Arrow Fastener stapler factory where both of their parents worked after moving to New Jersey from Puerto Rico. "We used to see our friends die from drug overdoses."

Joseph Santos gave talks about the harm of drug use at schools and treatment groups, Luis Santos said.

Because their mother was dealing with addiction during their childhood, Guzman said she mostly raised Santos, though she was only four years his senior. That bond, she said, makes his death particularly painful.

"I keep crying. I can hardly sleep. All I keep thinking is why," she said.

At the time of his death, Santos was on probation, having pleaded guilty to drug possession in June after a traffic stop in Cranford, N.J. Valenzuela said those drugs were years old, forgotten in the pocket of a coat. Her fiancée, she said, was clean.

Valenzuela and Luis Santos said they expect to attend a vigil Wednesday night for Santos near the shooting scene. Scheduled for 5:30 p.m. at Lincoln Avenue and Hamilton Boulevard, the event, which is also referred to in a news release as a protest, is being organized by Make the Road PA, which advocates for Latino communities, along with the Allentown NAACP; the Allentown Coalition for Economic Dignity; the faith-based Nehemiah Collaborative; NextGen Pennsylvania, a political action group; Women's March, Pennsylvania chapter; and Juventud en Camino, Make the Road's youth organization.

"This act of extreme police brutality is not a fluke or an accident, but part of the police system that regularly works to detain, deport and kill black and brown people across the country," Make the Road said in the release. "Our members stand with the family and all families that face brutality at the hands of an overzealous and destructive police force. We remain vigilant while we wait for more details."

The Lehigh County coroner's office Tuesday said Santos died from "multiple gunshot wounds," but did not say how many. Santos' death was ruled a homicide, which means he was killed by someone else, not that the act was criminal. Coroner Scott Grim said his office is awaiting the results of toxicology tests on Santos, which could take weeks.

The officer, whose identity has not been released, is on paid leave while state police investigate the shooting. South Whitehall Township Commissioner Mark Pinsley said Tuesday he'll ask Lehigh County District Attorney Jim Martin to refer the investigation to the state attorney general's office to avoid the perception of bias.

"I want to ensure that there is a proper, unbiased and transparent investigation conducted and no appearance of conflict," Pinsley, a state Senate candidate, said in a prepared statement. "The best way to ensure public faith in our justice system is for a neutral party to conduct the investigation."

Pinsley said he plans to attend the vigil before the South Whitehall commissioners' regular meeting convenes at 7 p.m. He is the only township official to comment publicly on the shooting.

Valenzuela said she met Sunday morning with Lehigh County Detective James Bruchak, deputy coroner Michael Bartholomew and state police Trooper Thomas Rummerfield, who told her only that there was an altercation between Santos and the police officer.

When Valenzuela pressed for more details, the officials told her they couldn't discuss the case further because of the investigation.

Valenzuela can't make sense of the reports that Santos was interfering with traffic and grabbing passing cars. According to one account, he ripped a window from a car.

Luis Santos also said the behavior described by authorities was unlike his brother.

"There were times when he would get serious, but he was never a violent person," Luis Santos said.

Guzman said the family wants answers from police.

"What was that cop thinking? What was going through his head?" she asked. "Why didn't he use a Taser, you could see in the video he wasn't armed. What threat could he really have been to them?"

Wednesday will also mark the first time South Whitehall Township Commissioners will meet since the shooting. Township commissioner President Christina Tori Morgan and Vice President Glenn Block did not respond to messages.

"I think we need to stand with the people so they know we represent them and we're part of this community,"

Pinsley said. "More than anything else, we want them to know there is transparency throughout this process." Pinsley is running for state Senate against longtime Republican incumbent Sen. Pat Browne. The first police officer on scene radioed for backup, describing Santos as having a possible "mental issue," according to the recording of Lehigh County 911 dispatches provided by Broadcastify. He indicates Santos is bleeding from his arm. Santos damaged vehicles, including ripping the window off of one, according to the district attorney's office. Christine Schiavo contributed to this story. Credit: By Peter Hall; ;Sarah M. Wojcik; ;Laurie Mason Schroeder - Of The Morning Call - Christine Schiavo contributed to this story. Caption: Joseph Santos

DETAILS

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