

Man Killed by Police at Alabama Mall Was a 'Good Guy With a Gun,' Family's Lawyer Says

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

The parents of Emantic Fitzgerald Bradford Jr. said that he pulled out a gun after a gunman opened fire inside the Riverchase Galleria in Hoover, Ala., to protect shoppers.

FULL TEXT

On Thanksgiving night, the sounds of gunshots inside an Alabama mall sent shoppers diving for cover and sprinting for exits. Outside the mall, Emantic Fitzgerald Bradford Jr. pulled out a gun and rushed to protect shoppers, his family said.

But Mr. Bradford was soon dead. An off-duty police officer working security at the mall, Riverchase Galleria in Hoover, Ala., fatally shot him, the authorities said. In the days that followed, the official account by the Hoover Police Department of what happened inside and outside the mall has shifted drastically.

At first, the officer was praised for stopping a gunman after two people were shot outside a Footaction store on the second floor. Then the police said that Mr. Bradford was not in fact the gunman and that the true gunman remained on the loose.

Early Monday morning, the Police Department made another statement. "With certainty Mr. Bradford brandished a gun during the seconds following the gunshots," the statement said, adding that his actions had "instantly heightened the sense of threat to approaching police officers responding to the chaotic scene."

Later on Monday, the department sought to explain its use of the word brandished, saying, "Mr. Bradford had a gun in his hand as police officers responded." But the police have not elaborated or explained why he was viewed as a threat.

The radically changing stories by the authorities have left Mr. Bradford's parents, April Pipkins and Emantic Bradford Sr., distraught and demanding answers. Mr. Bradford, 21, was licensed to carry a firearm, his family said. Mr. Bradford's death at the hands of law enforcement has also raised questions about the realities of the "good guy with a gun" theory advocated by the National Rifle Association and President Trump as a solution to mass shootings. In a two-week period this month, Mr. Bradford and another man, both of whom were black, have been killed by the police while their families said they were trying to stop gunmen.

On Nov. 11, the other man, Jemel Roberson, was killed while on duty as a security guard at a Chicago-area bar . He was chasing after a gunman when a police officer fatally shot him. The N.R.A. did not respond to requests for comment this month after Mr. Roberson was killed or on Monday about Mr. Bradford's death.

Benjamin L. Crump, a lawyer for Mr. Bradford's family, said that Mr. Bradford had one problem when the officer saw him holding a gun: He was black.

"It's almost as if the Second Amendment doesn't apply to black people," Mr. Crump said in an interview on Monday.

Mr. Crump, who also appeared on CNN on Monday morning alongside Mr. Bradford's parents, accused the officer of opening fire within "milliseconds" of encountering Mr. Bradford and without issuing verbal commands.

"If you happen to be black, police see you as a criminal and they shoot and kill you," he said. "That has been shown in Chicago, and now here in Birmingham, Alabama, which is the epicenter of the civil rights movement."

He added, "It does not matter if you are a good guy with a gun."

Ms. Pipkins said that Mr. Bradford was instinctively a helpful person and was most likely only trying to defend people at the mall.

"I will never be able to see my son's face again, or to look into his eyes, or hear him say, 'Mom, I love you,'" Ms. Pipkins said.

An 18-year-old man was struck by gunfire at the mall, as was a 12-year-old girl who was described by the police as an "innocent bystander." It was unclear if the two were shot by the same person. Their conditions were not known on Monday.

The police said they had "certain information about" the suspected gunman, who remained at large, but they encouraged the public to call the authorities if they had additional details.

The State Bureau of Investigation, part of the Alabama Law Enforcement Agency, is investigating the episode on the request of the Jefferson County district attorney, Mike Anderton. The Hoover Police Department has opened an internal investigation into the actions of the officer who killed Mr. Bradford.

The Police Department said on Monday that footage from the responding officers' body cameras and other videos had been turned over to investigators. The contents of the videos have not been made public. Mr. Bradford's family has demanded that they be released.

Hoover's mayor, Frank Brocato, said in a statement on Monday night that officials were in the process of requesting a meeting with the Bradford family. He said officials were seeking "answers" and pleaded for the public to be patient.

"There's honestly not a lot we can say at this point since the investigation is not in the city's hands," Mr. Brocato said.

Mr. Bradford received a general discharge from the Army in August, but a spokesman said that he had not completed his training.

His parents said they had not believed the Hoover Police Department's initial contention that their son had been involved in the shooting. They have been troubled by the lack of communication from the authorities, they said.

His father said on CNN that the police had not contacted him and that he learned about his son's death on social media. His mother said she wanted an open-casket funeral but had been unable to view his body to see its condition.

The elder Mr. Bradford, who retired as a supervisor at the Birmingham City Jail, said he was disturbed by his son's treatment at the hands of fellow law enforcement officers.

"You show me a lack of respect, his mother a lack of respect, and my son a lack of respect because you allowed him to lay there in the mall bleeding out, and you never covered him up," Mr. Bradford said. "You just let him lay there."

Credit: Matthew Haag

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