

Showing support; 100 rally for police officer Jonathan Roselle at site of shooting; interfaith service miles away centers around victim Joseph Santos

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FULL TEXT

On Sunday afternoon, more than 100 people assembled on Hamilton Boulevard near the spot on Hamilton Boulevard where South Whitehall Township police officer Jonathan Roselle fatally shot a man two weeks ago. It was a peaceful rally. People carried signs such as "Let police do their job" and waved Thin Blue Line American flags. Cars driving by honked in support.

There were no official speakers. But as they mingled, some wondered why Roselle was charged with voluntary manslaughter in the death of Joseph Santos of Hasbrouck Heights, N.J.

"You can't crucify a police officer when he's trying to do his job," said Mike Cepress of Catasauqua.

It was a different message nearly four miles away at Resurrected Life Community Church on North Ninth Street in Allentown.

There, an interfaith service for Santos, 44, grew into a united call for justice and reform as several Lehigh Valley religious leaders took to the pulpit, insisting the country's humanity is at stake.

"What is it about black and brown bodies that elicits so much violence?" asked Larry Pickens, ecumenical director of the Lehigh County Conference of Churches.

The two events, both starting at 2 p.m, took place days after Lehigh County District Attorney Jim Martin announced Roselle had been charged with voluntary manslaughter, a felony punishable by up to 20 years in prison. Roselle, 33, has been on \$75,000 unsecured bail.

Martin said Roselle, who was hired by South Whitehall police in December, was not justified in using deadly force, given that Santos was not armed or committing a felony and that deadly force was not necessary to prevent death or secure an arrest.

"This was an act of a relatively inexperienced officer who held a subjective fear for his own safety, but he made a decision which objectively was unreasonable in light of the facts," Martin said Tuesday.

According to authorities, Santos, who had been with his family at Dorney Park & Wildwater Kingdom, had been jumping on moving vehicles along the 3700 block of Hamilton Boulevard when Roselle arrived. Martin said some vehicles were damaged, including one in which a window was ripped out.

The rally for Roselle was organized through a suggestion posted on Facebook by New Tripoli resident Corey Fatzinger.

The idea of a pro-police rally being held at the spot where Santos died provoked immediate outrage from the NAACP Allentown Branch - which demanded the event be canceled.

A vigil for Santos was held in the same area on Aug. 1, drawing about 100 participants. A makeshift memorial has been set up in his name.

Sunday's rally for Roselle went off without incident except for a yelling match that broke out when a woman

showed up and told supporters they were supporting a murderer. A man told her she was anti-American. Upper Macungie police arrived to watch over the exchange.

Among those participating at the Roselle rally were people who wanted to show their support for police, those who felt Roselle was wrongly charged and others who believe Santos was at least partly responsible for what happened.

Fatzinger said Roselle was "wrongly accused."

"He did his job and now he's been hung out to dry, so he needs all the support he can get," Fatzinger said.

Cepress, who attended the rally with his rottweiler Bonzo, said he has a number of friends in law enforcement and they've discussed a video shot by a witness that captured the shooting.

None of his law enforcement friends questioned officer Roselle's use of force, he said. At worst, they said, he may have fired a few too many rounds, he said.

Regardless, Cepress said no one knows exactly what Roselle was faced with when he confronted Santos.

"The police officer had direct contact with him," he said. "He looked him in the eyes. He heard what he was saying. He was there giving the individual commands and was completely ignored."

Peggy Karpeuk of Upper Macungie, who wore a Thin Blue Line T-shirt and carried a large Thin Blue Line American flag, said she felt bad for the situation Roselle was put in for "the guy's wrongful action."

"In a split second he had to make such a decision on a busy road like this," she said, pointing to Hamilton Boulevard.

Richard Kehm, 77, of Lower Macungie Township was dressed in a red, white and blue cowboy hat and shirt and holding #PSPStrong sign in support of state police Cpl. Seth Kelly, who was wounded in a gun battle in November on Route 33 in Plainfield Township.

Dashcam footage of the Route 33 shooting was released last week, and Kehm said it shows how quickly things can escalate when officers are dealing with a person refusing commands and resisting arrest.

"Thank God he was all right," Kehm said. "These guys are really up against it at that moment."

Kehm and his wife Phyllis say they have four relatives in law enforcement, including one in South Whitehall, which is another reason they wanted to offer their support for Roselle, a rookie officer.

"These officers, they don't know if they are going to be coming home to their families or not," she said.

About 100 people attended the interfaith service.

Pastor Greg Edwards opened the service by lifting up Santos' loved ones and then reading aloud the names of people killed by police officers across the nation.

The long list should disturb anyone, regardless of race, religion or ethnicity, according to Celicia Baxter, senior pastor of New Creation UCC in Palmer Township.

A mother of two boys with another baby on the way, Baxter described said the powerful love of a parent should motivate everyone to work toward a world where every person is treated with dignity and respect.

"We want a home where police officers only use deadly force as the absolute last resort, in the most extreme of cases - not as the first resort," she said. "I say this as a white mother of white boys because when one part of the body suffers, we all suffer. Our criminal justice system has no justice until there is justice for all. We are not free, until we are all free."

Rev. Benjamin T. Hailey, a senior pastor of Union Baptist Church, spoke softly to those gathered, encouraging them to think hard about what they feel when they take stock of him: a tall, black man.

"What do you see, when you see me? Do you see a pastor? A man of integrity? Or do you see another one of those black boys and so you need to clutch your purse?" Hailey asked.

Arlene Figueroa, an ex-wife of Joseph Santos and the mother of his daughter, said she's been praying for the South Whitehall police officer charged with shooting him.

"You were the last person to see Joey alive," she said, trembling before Sunday's service. "I don't have hatred in my heart because God ... God gives me strength. And I just pray for you."

During the ceremony, a tearful Figueroa described how she and Santos were still incredibly close after sharing an

18-year relationship and an 8-year-old daughter.

Santos, she said, adored the girl. He would paint her nails and hold tea parties with her and her dolls. Their daughter, Figueroa said, has autism and is still reeling from the death of her grandfather. Figueroa said she's yet to reveal to the girl that Santos was killed. But she knows the time is coming.

Meanwhile, Figueroa said, the healing has been hard.

"I have to tell my legs 'Left and right' every day. They say you heal day by day. But I haven't seen no change yet."

Credit: Sarah M. Wojcik; Michelle Merlin ; Manuel Gamiz Jr. - Of The Morning Call

Caption: An individual who said 'no comment' when asked for his name, holds a sign supporting South Whitehall Township Police officer Jonathan Roselle during a rally Sunday along Hamilton Boulevard close to where Roselle shot and killed Joseph Santos two weeks ago.

Maegan Munoz (left) of Make the Road PA and Arlene Figueroa, ex-wife of Joseph Santos, listen Sunday to a speech during an interfaith service at Resurrected Life Church in Allentown.

Margaret Stansfield of Lehighon holds a bumper sticker high in the air during Sunday's rally. The rally was along Hamilton Boulevard Joseph Santos was shot and killed by South Whitehall Township Police Officer Jonathan Roselle two weeks ago.

Severin Johnson, 4, of Bethlehem gets a high-five from Michael Cardell, an officer with the Upper Macungie Township Police Department, during Sunday's rally on Hamilton Boulevard.

Cantor Kevin Wartell of Temple Beth El of South Whitehall Township and Arlene Figueroa, ex-wife of Joseph Santos, light a candle in memory of Santos during an interfaith service at Resurrected Life Church in Allentown on Sunday.

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