

Slowik: Police killing of Jemel Roberson could be Southland's Black Lives Matter moment

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FULL TEXT

His name was Jemel Roberson.

He was a black man gunned down by a white Midlothian police officer Sunday morning in Robbins. Family, friends and community members are calling for justice.

Roberson's death could become the Southland's moment in the Black Lives Matter movement.

Whether that happens depends in part on how authorities in the law enforcement, legal and judicial communities handle the case.

If justice is served, Roberson's name may fade away. Those who knew him in Chicago and the south suburbs will remember him. But there might no longer be reason for reporters to speak his name on television or for famous people to mention him on social media.

If, on the other hand, justice is not served, Roberson, of Chicago, could join a lexicon of names spoken in the fight for justice: Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Philando Castile and Laquan McDonald, to name a few.

Some of the names have become so well-known, they may become historical figures in our nation's quest for racial equality. Some of the places where they died could become landmarks associated with demonstrations calling for fair and equal treatment of people of color.

Could Midlothian become the next Ferguson, Mo.? Robbins, where Roberson was killed, is 91.4 percent black.

Neighboring Midlothian —where the white police officer who shot Roberson works —is 6.8 percent black, according to Census data.

Roberson was 26 years old. He was father to a 9-month-old boy named Tristan. He was a church-going guy who played keyboards and drums in churches on Sundays, friends said.

Roberson's life was cut short Sunday in a parking lot outside Manny's Blue Room Lounge in Robbins. In the days since Roberson's homicide, the case has received international media attention.

"Jemel Roberson was a young father and a security guard who aspired to one day become a police officer," U.S. Sen. Cory Booker, D-N.J., Tweeted Tuesday night. "On Sunday, he was doing his job, subduing a shooter, when he was killed by a police officer. Words can't begin to describe my horror and outrage."

Witnesses described events to reporters. A fight broke out at the bar, they said. Roberson escorted a patron from the premises. The man returned with a gun. Shots were fired. Bullets struck four people, who are expected to recover from their wounds.

MORE COVERAGE: Midlothian cop told Jemel Roberson to drop weapon before fatal Robbins shooting, state police say. Lawyer claims probe rushed. »

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

Roberson subdued one of the men involved in the shooting. Officers from Robbins and the Cook County sheriff's police departments responded.

Supporters described Roberson as a hero who prevented more serious casualties because of his actions during a mass shooting. He was an armed security guard, a "good guy with a gun."

Then the Midlothian police officer arrived and shot Roberson.

Illinois State Police are investigating the incident. In a statement issued late Tuesday, the agency said the Midlothian officer “encountered a subject in plain black clothing with no markings readily identifying him as a security guard, armed with a gun in the western parking lot.

“According to witness statements, the Midlothian officer gave the armed subject multiple verbal commands to drop the gun and get on the ground before ultimately discharging his weapon and striking the subject.”

The official statement from state police seemed to contradict witness accounts that Roberson wore a hat that identified him as a security guard. The choice of the word “ultimately” by authorities implies the officer was deliberate and acted only after he considered other possible courses of action.

For some, the circumstances of Roberson’s shooting are similar to the 2014 killing of McDonald, a 17-year-old who was shot 16 times. In that case, several officers on the scene seemed to have the situation under control when a cop showed up and indiscriminately shot McDonald. A jury convicted Chicago police officer Jason Van Dyke of second-degree murder.

Roberson’s friend Stringer Harris was among protesters who called for justice Tuesday afternoon outside the Midlothian Police Department.

“It takes time. It doesn’t happen overnight,” Harris said. “We won’t get justice tomorrow. We won’t get justice today. But we do want justice.”

The Black Lives Matter movement began with a hashtag on social media following the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the 2012 shooting death of Martin in Florida. In 2014, Michael Brown Jr. was shot and killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Mo., which led to protests and civil unrest.

Also in 2014, video captured Garner pleading, “I can’t breathe,” as he died when a New York City police officer put him in a chokehold. Rice, a 12-year-old boy playing with a toy gun, was shot and killed by police in Cleveland.

In 2015, Black Lives Matter protested the death of Freddie Gray in Baltimore, who died after sustaining injuries while being transported in a police van. In 2016, Alton Sterling was shot dead by police in Baton Rouge, La., while selling CDs outside a convenience store. Castile was shot dead by a police officer during a traffic stop in Falcon Heights, Minn. Castile’s girlfriend live-streamed video of the aftermath.

In the fall of 2016, some NFL players began kneeling during the national anthem as a way of protesting unjustified killings of black civilians by white police officers.

NBA player and Robbins native Dwyane Wade Tweeted about Roberson on Tuesday.

“Speechless! Even after hearing he was one of ‘the good guys’ he’s still shot like his life doesn’t matter! A man that was doing his job to protect the lives of others . . . I grew up streets away from Manny’s Blue Room in Robbins this hurts my heart,” Wade wrote.

If considered in isolation, each incident might be forgotten as time passes and anger fades. When considered collectively, however, each additional incident sustains the Black Lives Matter movement. Why, in America, does it seem that black people are more likely to be shot dead by white police officers without justification?

“We want to have a national conversation about police crimes,” protest organizer Eric Russell said Tuesday outside the Midlothian police station.

Midlothian Police Chief Daniel Delaney posted a message on the department’s Facebook page Tuesday that seemed to express an unusual level of sensitivity about the incident.

“What we have learned is Jemel Roberson was a brave man who was doing his best to end an active shooter situation at Manny’s Blue Room,” Delaney wrote. “The Midlothian Police Department is completely saddened by this tragic incident and we give our heartfelt condolences to Jemel, his family and his friends. There are no words that can be expressed as to the sorrow his family is dealing with.”

Community members want accountability. People want reforms in how police are trained to respond in situations. One life lost because of mistakes or unjust practices is too many.

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Credit: Ted Slowik

DETAILS

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People:	Martin, Trayvon Garner, Eric Sterling, Alton Gray, Freddie Brown, Michael Booker, Cory A Wade, Dwyane McDonald, Laquan Castile, Philando Rice, Tamir Zimmerman, George
Company / organization:	Name: State Police-Illinois; NAICS: 922120; Name: Facebook Inc; NAICS: 518210, 519130; Name: Black Lives Matter; NAICS: 813319; Name: National Football League--NFL; NAICS: 711211, 813990; Name: Twitter Inc; NAICS: 519130
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