

## NAACP meets with police chief in WH teen's death - Ledger, The (Lakeland, FL) - December 27, 2018

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LAKELAND — Community leaders from the local NAACP met with Lakeland Police Chief Larry Giddens the day after an officer-involved shooting early Wednesday morning left a Winter Haven teenager dead.

It was a meeting to create a conversation and understanding of the incident as social media buzzed across Polk County after 17-year-old **Michael Jerome Taylor** was fatally shot as he endangered LPD officers and a large gathering of patrons while attempting to flee the parking lot at Salem's Gyros & More restaurant in a stolen car.

Giddens shared with the NAACP group the issues his department is addressing in working with Salem's, located at 101 E. Memorial Blvd., one of which is identifying where all the people come from late at night.

Don Brown, the first vice president of the Florida State Chapter of the NAACP, told The Ledger that he preferred comments on the shooting come from the local chapter president, Reginald Ardis Sr., but added he is concerned that Salem's stays open to 4 a.m., past the closing time of a popular nearby nightclub, Rumors. An additional concern is "controlling the crowd gathering."

"A life to me is more important than a dollar," he said.

Witness to shooting

Crowd control at Salem's seems to be a widely known problem, according to 21-year-old Tomyah Rivers of Frostproof.

She and her cousin had just arrived at Salem's after spending time at Rumors the night of the shooting, she said.

Rivers said that when her cousin came outside after ordering food, the police had arrived, blocking the entrance to the restaurant parking lot.

"I told him we need to leave, the police are here, and my cousin said, 'Oh, they are here all the time because it is crowded,'" she said.

Rivers said the police were initially in a circle talking to one another, then started trying to clear the crowd.

Her cousin hit the horn on their car, and she said "that black officer told us if you guys keep blowing that horn, you are going to get a ticket."

Rivers said at that point, they could not pull out to get in line to leave, because there were other cars in the way.

When the shooting began, they saw officers come from behind their car, she said.

"I got out of the car, then I noticed them shooting at the Camaro and it kept going," she said.

Her cousin shot video, and while initially sharing it on Facebook, later removed it, she noted.

"I was amazed at how many bullets went to that car. I ran after them," she said.

After the Chevrolet Camaro crashed into another car, which went into the wall of a local business, Rivers said she could hear people crying, saying, "they are trying to kill us."

"Everybody was basically trying to get out of the way so they would not get shot by the police," she said.

"I saw them take his body out of the car and check his pulse," Rivers said. "That was my first time going to Salem's and I am never going back ... I am from Frostproof. I don't even know this boy and I saw him die."

#### Review of shooting

During the tense moments leading up to the actual shooting at approximately 2:48 a.m., as officers were clearing between 150 and 200 people from the parking lot, Officer Raj Patel noticed one of the vehicles resembled a Camaro that had been reported stolen, according to Gary Gross, public spokesman for LPD.

In a video released by the police department, Officer Markais Neal was in the parking lot south of the vehicle and fired as Taylor accelerated the Camaro toward him. Two other officers also fired at the vehicle as it continued to accelerate through the parking lot.

The Camaro struck several vehicles and a utility pole. A female passenger jumped out of the car and was detained.

Her name is not being released, Gross said, because she is a witness to the incident and heard officers telling Taylor to stop the car and get out.

After she bailed out of the car, the Camaro continued, hitting another vehicle and sending it into the exterior wall of a nearby business, Bike Barn.

Taylor was removed from the vehicle and officers performed emergency first aid. A short time later he was pronounced dead at Lakeland Regional Health Medical Center.

Gross said the department is not sure how many times Taylor was hit nor whether he was shot from the front or the back, or both, because the autopsy report has not been received from the

Medical Examiner's office.

Gross said although LPD has policies that prevent officers from shooting into moving vehicles, "in this case, the officer was in fear of being hit or killed by this vehicle."

"We don't encourage it, we don't train for it," said Gross, "unless the member believes it is necessary to protect themselves."

The LPD Violent Crimes Unit and the State Attorney's Office were both on scene investigating the shooting immediately. All officers involved in the incident were placed on paid administrative leave for four days.

A firearm was located on the driver's side of the vehicle, according to Gross.

Gross said at the time the officers tried to stop the Camaro, they did not know Taylor's identity or that he had a gun in the vehicle.

### Investigation process

Three investigations will take place, according to Gross: one is a criminal investigation, one an administrative investigation to determine whether any policies were broken, and the independent investigation done by the State Attorney's Office.

The name of the girl who jumped out of the car is being withheld, though Gross said the LPD is identifying her as an 18-year-old who did not know Taylor very well.

It was only her second time being with him, Gross said.

Other witnesses were also interviewed at the scene that support the fact that officers were trying to get Taylor out of the car, Gross said.

"She heard numerous commands for him to get out," he said.

Gross said many on social media have questioned why the officers did not shoot out the Camaro's tires.

"The bullets could ricochet, and you have people all over the place," he said. "These officers did what they were trained to do. (Neal) felt like his life was in imminent danger," Gross said, adding that the only person who made the wrong decision was "that young man who was driving the car."

"He made the decision to hit the gas, and not obey a lawful command. You can always contest that command later, he decided to hit the gas," Gross added. "That cost him his life. It is not a racial thing. Some of the officers were minorities ... a very traumatic event."

### Stolen gun on floorboard

According to LPD, not only was the Camaro reported stolen, but a stolen, loaded handgun was

found on the floorboard beside Taylor.

Polk County Sheriff's Office spokesperson Carrie Horstman said the PCSO worked a vehicle burglary on July 12 in Winter Haven during which a 9 mm handgun was stolen from a resident's 2003 Chevrolet Tahoe that was parked in front of the home overnight. The SUV was unlocked, said Horstman.

The stolen firearm was entered into the system, an approximate value of \$300, according to reports.

Lakeland Police reached out to the PCSO detective assigned to that case to advise they recovered the stolen gun.

### Officers involved in shooting

The three officers identified as using their firearms during the incident were Neal, 28, who has been with the department one year; Patel, 23, who has been with the department a year and six months; and Joseph Novis, 25, who also has served LPD for a year and six months.

According to postings on the Lakeland Police Department Facebook page when the three were welcomed to the department, their backgrounds varied.

Neal worked with the Highlands County Sheriff's Office for just over two years and was also a graduate of the Polk County SWAT School before coming to work for LPD.

Patel worked at the Polk County Sheriff's Office for a year and 10 months. A graduate of Lake Gibson High School, he has resided in Lakeland most of his life.

Novis was born and raised in Lakeland, and also hails formerly from the Polk County Sheriff's Office, where he served a year and 11 months.

Novis was involved in an incident in November where a couple accused Lakeland police officers of roughing them up and falsely arresting them after a brawl that broke out in the parking lot of Salem's around 2 a.m. Thanksgiving morning.

Five people were arrested that night, among them Raynah Wilson and her boyfriend, Van Skanes. Skanes, 28, was charged with affray and resisting an officer without violence. Wilson was charged with battery on a law enforcement officer.

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