

Ministers call for peace in wake of Lakeland - Ledger, The (Lakeland, FL) - December 28, 2018

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LAKELAND — While the local chapter of the NAACP issued a statement calling for a "full review" of the event surrounding the death of **Michael Jerome Taylor**, Lakeland Police Chief Larry Giddens joined area ministers from the Lakeland Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance at a late morning news conference held at First Baptist Institutional Church in which the ministers called for the community to "remain calm and not rush to judgment" until the criminal investigation is finished.

Reginald Ardis, president of the Lakeland Branch of the NAACP, said that although the NAACP does not condone theft of another person's property or any crime, they do believe that "all law enforcement departments should use due care in apprehending those suspected of committing a crime."

According to police reports, Taylor, 17, was shot Wednesday morning at Salem's Gyros & Subs Restaurant, 101 E. Memorial Blvd., after accelerating a stolen car toward Lakeland police as they yelled commands to step out of the car. The Lakeland Police Department released surveillance video of the incident.

"The Camaro could have been blocked by a police car to help disable the vehicle," Ardis said, adding, "Just maybe a life could have been spared. Instead, we are left wondering if all precautions were taken by the officers involved in the shooting. Incidents of this type are happening too much to our youth."

At Friday's news conference called by the area ministers, the Rev. Eddie Lake, Alliance president, said at some point, the Alliance plans to hold awareness events to help young people learn how to interact with law enforcement, but for now, they are asking anyone who was in the parking lot the night of the shooting to provide any information they have to the police, whether it be videos, audio recordings or statements.

"It is always a heartfelt matter," Lake said, "especially when young black males are killed in our country, regardless of the issues. And with law enforcement involved, it adds another layer of harm because we are not sure what happened."

"But as the investigation goes forward, we want to make sure that we support the family and the community to make sure we keep that peace and not allow outside influences to stir up trouble in our community."

Lake told reporters he has advice for young people.

"The message to the youth is to listen to your parents, be educated on how to maneuver in the community, on how to respond to law enforcement properly, and how to ask for help and

support," he said. "We stand in solidarity to ensure that every voice will be heard. With God's help, we will make it through this together."

Giddens said the department met with Salem's corporate officers Thursday, and Salem's asked for suggestions on how to control the late night crowds that congregate in the parking lot after 2 a.m. when local bars close.

Suggestions offered by the police were "quickly agreed" upon, said the chief, and include Salem's hiring extra officers for security on its property at its expense, as well as closing the restaurant inside at 2 a.m. and using the drive-through for late-night patrons.

The NAACP also supports calling upon both Salem's restaurant and nearby Rumor's Night Club to provide better protection for their patrons.

"Too often, violence in the early hours of the morning is centered at that location," noted Ardis in his news release.

Meanwhile, protesters gathered at the Winter Haven Police Department in Winter Haven.

Giddens said protests so far have been peaceful, noting it is a way to send a message to parents about their children.

"What we do to make a difference in these kids' lives, how we stop the next tragedy from occurring," said Giddens.

"It's heartbreaking when you think about this," he said of the shooting, "we need to focus on this young man and how did he get to this point in his life, and why did it happen."

There has been some backlash against the Lakeland Police, Giddens noted.

People have made statements on Facebook, he said, cautioning the public to "be careful what they write, especially if you are making threats against law enforcement.

Alliance ministers want to help anyone who voices concerns with the shooting or any mistreatment they may have received the night of the shooting, Lake said.

"We want to work with all the law enforcement, State Attorney's Office and community to make sure that there is resolve to this matter," he said.

Lake said the incident touches him deeply, because he lost a friend to violence when he was 16 years old.

"And I have buried so many youth, so many children, so many adults, that it is part of my reality as a young man and as a pastor the last 16 or 17 years."

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