



## 'No alternative,' police

### Detective constable fights back tears during testimony Belanger's comments trigger backlash from victim's family

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The Toronto police officer who fatally shot Jeffrey Reodica told a coroner's inquest yesterday he had no alternative but to shoot the knife-wielding teen because he feared that he and his partner's lives were in jeopardy.

Throughout the dramatic testimony of Det. Const. Dan Belanger, the officer often paused to take deep breaths, sip from a glass of water and even fought back tears.

The tension within the courtroom later spilled outside during the lunch break as members of the slain teen's family shouted at Belanger and accused him of lying. While on the stand, Belanger shifted in his seat while he recalled the events of May 21, 2004, when he and his partner, Det. Const. Allen Love, struggled with Reodica on the ground in an attempt to handcuff him.

Remarkably, the 17-year-old managed to break free of their grip and swung out at Belanger with his left hand, "in a rising roundhouse swing," he said.

Tucked inside the teen's fist was a knife with a three- or four-inch blade, the officer told the five-person jury.

Belanger said the teen struck his inner right thigh, which caused him to jump back, and he then spotted the blade swinging in the direction of his partner's face, neck and torso.

As Belanger yelled to his partner, "He's got a knife," he reached for his firearm and shot three times, recalled the officer, rubbing at his eyes.

"I believed Jeffrey was going to inflict serious or bodily harm on myself or my partner," said Belanger. "To stop that, I discharged my firearm until that threat was stopped."

Was there no other way to handle the situation, asked Coroner's Counsel Satinder Besrai.

It was a question that was likely prompted by Belanger's earlier testimony that he had a knapsack with him that day containing an extendible baton and pepper spray — a knapsack that was left in the car during the confrontation with Reodica.

"There was no other alternative," insisted Belanger — a response that

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#### Racial conflict is at root of Jeffrey Reodica's death

The veteran cop was trying his best not to cry.

No, there wouldn't be any tears, not in the witness stand.

So he sipped from a glass of water, repeatedly cleared his throat, opened and shut his mouth, opened it again.

But the words had stopped coming.

Det. Const. Dan Belanger had got this far, in recounting what happened on the afternoon of May 21, 2004, the day when he shot and killed a teenager by the name of Jeffrey Reodica:

The youth had been on the ground, Belanger with one knee against his back, the other on his shoulder, attempting to cuff the boy's wrists.

Somehow, the officer told a coroner's inquest yesterday, Reodica managed to free his hand. Tucked into the palm was a knife, blade protruding.

"I yelled, 'He's got a knife!' I

elicited gasps of disbelief from Reodica's parents.

"If he got sprayed, he'd still have been able to swing out with the knife," said Belanger. "If I used my baton, by the time I got it open, he still would've hit (Love).

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baton and he had pepper spray ...  
Shooting three times was excessive'**

***Robyn Reodica, Jeffrey's mother***

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"There was no other way to handle the situation. No other way."

When asked by Besrai why it was necessary to shoot Reodica repeatedly, Belanger explained that it was only after three shots that the teen "went down."

"That's when I stopped," said the officer. "If he was still up I would've shot more."

The officer's comments were followed by a break in the proceedings and elicited an emotional outpouring from some family members not seen since the start of the inquest.

"That was bulls---," sister Robyn Reodica told reporters outside the courthouse. "He had an extendible baton and he had pepper spray. ... Shooting three times was excessive."

Nearby, Flora Reodica clutched a framed photo of the teen and yelled, "He didn't have to kill my son," as a friend tried unsuccessfully to calm her down. Wearing a T-shirt that read, "Justice for Jeffrey," she screamed "Killer cops," loud enough that Love and Belanger, who were standing inside the doors, could hear.

Father Willie Reodica also made no secret of his feelings as he marched back inside the courthouse yelling, "You don't know the rules of engagement. ... Why did he kill my son?"

Belanger and Love, flanked by a group of their own supporters, avoided confrontation by using another exit.

Later, Belanger's lawyer said the past two years have been "extraordinarily hard" on his client.

"This tragedy is written on his mind and his heart," said Joseph Markson about Belanger, who has been a police officer for 16 years. "The last thing he ever wanted to do was use his weapon that day."

Court has heard that Belanger and Love were in plainclothes and in an unmarked car when they responded that day to calls of a fight between two groups of teens — one white, the other mostly Filipino — near Lawrence Ave. E. and Bellamy Rd.

believe I yelled this a couple of times.

"I pushed off him to get distance because at this time he was swinging back towards me with the knife. He made contact with my inner thigh, with his left hand, the one with the knife in it.

Reodica was struggling to his feet, allegedly round-housing with the knife at Belanger's partner, Det. Const. Allen Love.

"I drew my firearm. As he continued swinging around towards my partner, I shot three times."

Shaking his head, as if still in wonder over split-second events that would claim one life, Reodica's, and forever alter his own, Belanger added softly: "He fell to the ground."

And then he stopped testifying, clearly overcome with emotion. At that point, one of the police lawyers requested a break.

As the courtroom emptied, Reodica's sister hissed sarcastically to a companion: "Ah, the poor thing. He's crying."

And Reodica's mom, with a framed photograph of her son clutched under her arm, could barely contain her contempt as she paced the pavement out front. "Why is he reading from his notes?" she demanded of a stranger. "Can't he talk from his heart?"

Yet there's nothing Belanger can say — under oath — that will appease this family, nor their many supporters, those wearing Justice for Jeffrey T-shirts and button-pictures of the youth on their chests. There is nothing that will calm their fury or lessen their grief.

Only their tears matter. All else is insincere and unworthy.

They will have discarded, by now, earlier testimony from one of Reodica's friends, who admitted the dead youth owned a knife — black handle, distinct zebra-like pattern on the blade — that matched the one found near him

Both officers testified they identified themselves as police to Reodica. Belanger even said he showed Reodica his badge and repeatedly told the teen during their struggle that he was under arrest for carrying a dangerous weapon — a rock, which the teen dropped when ordered to. Seconds later, Love joined the fray, which had erupted because Reodica would not get on the ground as Belanger had ordered. The Filipino teen was shot three times in the back and died three days later.

Amid conflicting eyewitness accounts, the Special Investigations Unit determined the shooting was justified and concluded Reodica struck out at Belanger with a knife. A knife with a black handle was found at the scene but no fingerprints were found on the knife.

To date, Love and Belanger are the only witnesses to testify that Reodica had a knife in his hands.



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by investigators that afternoon.

They will continue to assert — and some media will continue to state this baldly as fact — that no previous witness (before Love took the stand earlier this week) had seen a knife in Reodica's hand when the confrontation occurred, just beyond the front lawn of a house near Lawrence Ave. W., where other boys had taken cover from a posse of purportedly avenging youth with mayhem on their minds.

Yet the first teenager to take the stand in this inquest — one of the prey-boys who'd watched events unfold from the backyard where he'd sought refuge — had told the court he'd seen something in Reodica's hand that could have been a knife. A later witness also described seeing Reodica holding a knife-like object, and several testified they saw the teenager make swiping motions toward the officers.

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For a long time, this inquest seemed to be largely about that knife.

The obvious implication, given the skeptical questions posed by the family's lawyer and statements made by Reodica's supporters, is that the knife was a "throw-down," although no one has stated it so plainly.

Throw-downs — guns that can't be traced — have purportedly been used in the past by bad cops to justify otherwise unjustifiable use-of-force. I can't recall a proven throw-down case involving Toronto police. Nor can I recall any case at all where the throw-down was allegedly a knife.

In this case, the inference looms that either Belanger or Love just happened to have a nasty knife in their back pocket for the purpose, even though the two

plainclothes officers had responded to the radio call while out on a food run, having no idea what was about to ensue. The call — originating with a youth who claimed he was being chased by a large group of teenagers armed with knives and baseball bats — was issued three times, nobody responding, until Belanger and Love finally booked on it, dinner deferred, arriving at the residential street in an unmarked car.

Earlier, family lawyer Barry Swadron had also raised questions about the chain-of-evidence, as it applied to the knife (no fingerprints would be found on it, which will be addressed by forensic experts later), pointing out that the bag in which it is now sealed had a different identification tag from that in which it had originally been deposited.

Yet Swadron knows that the lead officer from the Special Investigations Unit — which originally probed the shooting and concluded Belanger had used reasonable force because Reodica had swiped at him with the knife before twisting around to flee — had, *as a courtesy to the family*, even though this is entirely against the rules, taken that knife from the evidence room in order to show it to the family, at their request.

This viewing, sources say, had occurred in Swadron's own office.

The investigator then used a new bag to re-seal the weapon.

There was nothing nefarious about it.

In any event, that "suspect" knife has now largely lost its sting.

Nobody, other than the two officers involved, appeared close enough to Reodica to have seen the knife. And they, as both have testified, saw it only at the last minute. If he had it in his hand, that hand had been tucked under his stomach, as Reodica was forced to the ground by the officers, this after dropping the large rock that he'd been holding in his other hand, and which

several witnesses had spotted.

The entire confrontation had begun, if not in innocence, then certainly without anyone envisioning how fatally it would turn out: One group of mostly brown-skinned youths, many of them Filipinos, descending on a school, primed for payback, fuming over an incident that had occurred the previous day — an argument over a basketball, white kids picking a fight with non-white kids, racial slurs tossed about, one teenager punched in the face.

The puncher was believed to be among the three teens who, 24 hours later, turned on their heels and ran when the brown kids allegedly came looking to settle things up.

Their paths, and that of two detective constables, were fated to cross, with disastrous results.

It should be noted here too that, only a week earlier, an officer in Cobourg had been slain by a knife-wielding teenager.

Inquests, by law, are not permitted to lay blame. They are intended to scrutinize events surrounding a death and make recommendations that might help prevent any reoccurrence in the future.

So that there won't be any more Jeffrey Reodicas, lying mortally wounded on the street.

This inquest has been mostly about the cops and what happened in the span of a few minutes.

But Jeffrey Reodica ended up dead because of what started in a schoolyard, among teenage boys with testosterone to burn, against the ugly backdrop of racially infused heat.

That's what needs looking at.

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*Rosie DiManno's column will return in September.*

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