



Reodica 'was not a threat': Witness

Neighbour testifies to seeing 'horrible' incident unfold Police Chief Blair makes first visit to proceedings

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Jeffrey Reodica never made a threatening motion toward a Toronto plainclothes police officer before the teenager was fatally shot while attempting to flee, an eyewitness told a coroner's inquest yesterday.

Brian La France, who lives in the Bellamy Rd.-Lawrence Ave. E. neighbourhood where the 17-year-old was gunned down on May 21, 2004, broke down in tears a few times as he recalled the "horrible" events he witnessed that afternoon from his porch. La France, a 42-year-old truck driver, testified Det. Const. Dan Belanger pulled up in his car, jumped out and ordered Reodica: "Get your hands out of your pocket."

Standing about 40 metres away, La France said he "never" heard Belanger or his partner identify themselves as police.

Belanger and his partner, both in plainclothes, were responding to calls about an altercation between two groups of youths — one group white, the other mostly brown. Belanger shot Reodica three times. The Filipino teen died three days later.

Amid conflicting eyewitness reports, the Special Investigations Unit concluded Reodica was armed with a knife and struck out at Belanger. The SIU said the shooting was justified.

Since the start of the inquest, there have been many inconsistencies in the testimony of eyewitnesses, but the one detail that has remained constant is no one saw a knife in Reodica's hands. La France's testimony yesterday marked the first time the inquest has heard from an independent eyewitness, someone who had nothing to do with either group of teenagers.

La France recalled that as Belanger approached Reodica, the teen simply "smiled."

As he moved toward Jeffrey, Belanger pulled a black object from his side and "whacked" Reodica across the face, said La France, pointing to the area between his left temple and chin.

"I heard a thump, crack sound," recalled a visibly shaken La France. "That sound will never leave my head."

Reodica lost his balance and Belanger threw him to the ground where the pair wrestled for a few seconds before the teen broke free. Reodica then jumped up and swung at Belanger, said La France.

"It was a swing to get away, it wasn't a full swing or a punch," he said, adding he never saw anything in Reodica's hand.

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After swinging at Belanger, Reodica ran off as the officer yelled, "Freeze. Get Back. Get back here." And after about eight running steps, "Bang, Bang, bang," rang out and Reodica collapsed, La France said.

"I seen Jeffrey's back, he was running, he was going," said La France. "He was not a threat at that time.... It seemed to me like he was trying to get away."

La France said after the shooting, a visibly shaken Belanger swore as he walked back to his car, threw something through the window, threw another item on the street and slammed down hard on the hood of his car. As he leaned against the car, he bent over and rubbed his legs.

Near the end of his testimony, La France's nerves became more frayed when he spotted police Chief Bill Blair slip into the back of the hearing room.

"I was real nervous when I saw him walk in," La France recounted later outside.

Blair, making his first visit to the inquest, said it was "important" he attend and show his support to "the officers and the Reodica family." He declined to comment on what he heard during his 45 minutes there.

La France's testimony differed from that of Ken Tomlin, who appeared later. The 47-year-old shipper/receiver said his friends received phone calls from the white teens saying they were hiding from another group that was brandishing weapons. Tomlin and his friends jumped into his beige van and circled the neighbourhood to find the white teens. The van was stopped by the officers. Tomlin said Belanger immediately identified himself as an officer. Tomlin then watched Belanger drive to where Reodica was with friends. As Belanger approached Reodica, Tomlin said he could hear him yelling, "Police officers. Stop. Hold it."

Reodica was ordered to lie down and he complied, said Tomlin, adding Belanger then got on top of Jeffrey and "applied some pressure" on the teen's back to hold him down.

A struggle ensued and "Jeffrey either stabbed or hit him in the leg hard enough for the officer to stagger back." Reodica, he said, then leapt up and lunged at Belanger, who opened fire.

Under cross-examination, Tomlin admitted he did not have a clear view of the struggle at all times, adding he "assumed" Belanger was struck because he saw the officer recoil.

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