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Officer cursed teen before shooting, inquest told

HAYLEY MICK

A policeman slapped Jeffrey Reodica's head and called him a vulgar name moments before he shot the fleeing 17-year-old in the back, the slain youth's friend told a coroner's inquest yesterday.

He testified that the officer's actions were so frightening that he believed the man was related to three white teens Mr. Reodica's angry friends had been chasing in a bid at revenge on May 21, 2004.

"Those undercover cops. I didn't know they were cops," Mark, then 17, told investigators in the Special Investigations Unit hours after the shooting.

Yesterday, he testified he believed Mr. Reodica didn't know either.

Mark, who is 19 but cannot be identified by his last name under provisions of the Youth Criminal Justice Act, said he was six feet 91.8 metres) away when Mr. Reodica was shot.

He is the first of the victim's friends to testify at the inquest, which began last month.

During his three days of testimony, which ended yesterday, Mark described the events that led to the death of the young man who had been his friend since Grade 1.

He recalled it this way:

On May 20, 2004, he and four friends, all Filipino, were playing basketball at St. Rose of Lima High School on Lawrence Avenue just east of McCowan Road in Scarborough.

A group of white youths arrived at the court. One smirking teen snatched the ball.

Mark tried to retrieve it, setting off a fistfight.

His younger cousin lost two front teeth when he fell while chasing one of the teens.

As they ran off, Mark heard the white boys shout profanities, as well as "White power," and "Go back to your country and eat your rice."

The two sides exchanged a promise: Come back tomorrow. Angry, he vowed revenge.

The next day, word spread through Jean Vanier High School that there would be a fight at St. Rose of Lima after school. By the time he finished classes, a large crowd had gathered outside -- ready to thump the white kids.

Mr. Reodica offered to help; he believed the white teens had been picking on his younger cousin.

In two groups, more than 20 students piled onto the subway, and then a bus for the 3.5-kilometre trip to St. Rose of Lima school.

The white youths were waiting, armed with hockey sticks. But when they realized they were vastly outnumbered, they fled.

Mark and his friends gave chase, deep into the neighbourhood known as Ben's Jungle -- most of the street names begin with Ben. He and Mr. Reodica met up midway through the chase, and never left each other's side.

At Benleigh Drive, a white van pulled up and picked up one of the youths who were being chased. "Bring out your racist kids!" the Filipino youngsters shouted. They picked up some rocks.

Shortly afterward, a black car stopped and a man got out. Using the car door as a shield, he pointed a gun at Mr. Reodica. Another large man stood beside Mark, who said he was afraid.

The man carrying the gun approached Mr. Reodica and ordered him to drop the rock, which he did. Mark said he heard the man say: "Get on the floor, motherfucker." When Mr. Reodica complied, the man slapped him several times on the head and said, "You think you're tough?" before patting him down.

Mark said Mr. Reodica tried to fight off the man, swinging and punching him in the stomach. As he twisted and began to run, the man shot him.

Mark said the men never identified themselves as police or showed their badges.

An SIU investigation has said Detective Constable Dan Belanger was justified in shooting Mr. Reodica because the teen was swinging a knife. Like all the witnesses who have testified so far, Mark said he did not see Mr. Reodica with a knife. A knife was found at the scene.

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