

# “Guns only escalate situations”

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing April 9, 2021

 Latest in a series of posts in the wake of the George Floyd murder 

*“Guns only escalate situations. If walking gun-first into a tense situation with an obviously troubled person is by the books, the books need to be rewritten.”*

*Family spokesman*

ref: **“Unfortunately, he is deceased,” D.A. says of Catasauqua man”**

There’s a favorite saying in Gadfly house.

It’s borrowed from that classic work of American popular culture “SpongeBob SquarePants.”

It’s usually employed after some major bleep-up in the household.

**“Well, Squidward, what have we learned today?”**

It usually cracks us up. It usually softens the domestic post-mortem.

And then we can go about learning something from the dumb or well meaning but misguided things that one or more of us did.

Ok, ok, the D.A. ruled the police officer justified in killing Ryan Shirey. The officer feared for his life.

God love the officer. He knows what it’s like to look into the barrel of a gun. And he knows that he killed a mentally ill person he knew had seizures and who was holding a gun that was not loaded.

Gadfly can well imagine sleepless nights, lots of them.

So let’s put the actions of that officer on February 19 aside. He was justified in the eyes of the law.

But did thinking about that event at 90 Bridge St., Catasauqua, stop on February 20 when the Chief hit save on his computer, sending his report

into Dataville where it will emerge at the end of the year in a cold litany like this:

- 142 criminal arrests
- 19 DUI arrests
- 45 Juvenile arrests
- 732 Citations issued
- 117 Violation Warnings
- 808 Parking tickets
- 85 Abandoned vehicles tagged
- 1 killing

Will thinking about that February 19 event stop on April 6 after the D.A.'s press conference?

Can we not hope that there was or that there will be a meeting convened in the back room at 90 Bridge St. where the question of what we learned today is asked?

Do we ever hear of such an aftermath after this kind of event?

What happened on February 19 was justified, but, arguably, it was not smart.

What "de-escalation" training or range of de-escalation techniques do we see in operation?\*\*\*

Gadfly has been watching the Chauvin trial. Have you? The other day the subject of the testimony was de-escalation.

The purpose of de-escalation was memorably described in a soundbite by one of the testifiers as to enable the officer to go home and the subject to go home.

The saving of life. All life. A noble purpose.

Was it the best thing to do for the three officers to, in effect, corner a man who perhaps had access to a rifle and bow in a basement described

as dark enough so that officers had to use flashlights to maneuver, that was divided into rooms, where vision was obstructed by the layout?

What if the officers had waited, had not gone into the cellar, had bought time to contact headquarters and be made “fully aware” of the subject’s history of seizures and bought time for an agitated man to calm down, time to talk to his father as he wanted?

Maybe the outcome wouldn’t have been different. Gadfly knows that.

But he agrees with the family member: “Guns only escalate situations. If walking gun-first into a tense situation with an obviously troubled person is by the books, the books need to be rewritten.”

That sound like common sense.

Gadfly has to hope that the Catasauqua police department doesn’t close the book on this incident without asking whether there was something else they could have done to provide “protection to any and all residents,” in the words of their mission statement.

And Gadfly hopes for a more vigorous and more visible discussion about re-imagining public safety here in Bethlehem.

*\*\*\* Followers will recognize that this is the question Gadfly is exploring in the **Christian Hall** case.*

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selections from *Sarah M. Wojcik, “Fatal police shooting of armed Catasauqua man with mental health issues was justified, DA rules.” Morning Call, August 6, 2021.*

The Lehigh County district attorney determined that the Feb. 19 shooting death of an armed 27-year-old Catasauqua man at the hands of police was justified.

Ryan Shirey was killed in his home at 133 S. 14th St. after his ex-girlfriend called authorities during a “heated” argument. Police said that when three borough officers arrived at the home, Shirey fled to the

basement. He was found there holding a .38-caliber handgun that he refused to drop and then pointed at a borough officer, police said.

Authorities identified the officer who fired the fatal shots as Joelle Mota and indicated he was in fear for his life when he did so.

Authorities later learned the handgun Shirey was holding was not loaded, but officers had no way of knowing that, according to Lehigh County District Attorney Jim Martin. He said there was nothing to suggest that Shirey knew the gun was unloaded.

Martin made a ruling in the case Tuesday, after a probe that included witness statements, investigative reports and the review of body cameras from the three officers.

Martin said Mota gave Shirey six orders to drop the gun during the 36 seconds that elapsed between Shirey's being found in the basement and Mota's opening fire.

Martin learned that Catasauqua police had responded to the Shirey home seven times in the past, but never for a law enforcement matter. He said that on five of those occasions police arrived to help Shirey during medical calls when he was having seizures and once when his arm was lodged in a chair during what Shirey's father, Karl Shirey, described as a "mental episode."

Martin said none of the three officers who responded was fully aware of these incidents, though Mota was at the home in July 2019 to help Shirey during a seizure. The DA also noted that the officers were unaware of Shirey's mental health issues, which included a diagnosis of schizophrenia when he was a teen and an extended involuntary commitment for mental health treatment.

"When reading the full account of what happened when Ryan was shot dead in his home, one can only imagine how he felt, surrounded by police, weapons drawn," Shirey's family said in a statement Tuesday. "He must have been terrified and felt his life was in danger. And, in fact, reality bore that suspicion out. In a mere 36 seconds he was gone."

At 1:48 p.m. Feb. 19, police officers Mota, Patrick Best and Jenna Dumansky-Potak responded to the South 14th Street home after Shirey's ex-girlfriend and his mother's health care aide, Alyssa Nicole Adams, said she was assaulted and locked out of the home. Police said Shirey refused to come outside to talk to officers and eventually retreated to the basement.

Karl Shirey tried unsuccessfully to persuade his son to speak with police and leave the basement. Karl Shirey told police there was a rifle and a bow in the basement but he didn't think either was accessible to Shirey, and Adams agreed. Martin said no one in the home mentioned there was a pistol in the basement, which belonged to Karl Shirey's father, from his time as a police officer.

Best led the way into the basement, followed by the two other officers and Shirey's father. The stairway was dark and narrow, and officers used their flashlights to look around. They had unholstered their weapons because of the possibility of Shirey's using the rifle or bow.

The basement was divided into rooms, and the officers split up to look for Shirey. Body camera footage showed that when officers reached Shirey, he said he wanted to talk to his father.

"I want to talk to my dad," he said, according to body cam footage. "I want to talk to my [expletive] dad."

Mota asked Shirey to show his hands and saw he was holding a handgun.

"Put the gun down," Mota said, according to the report. "He has a gun. Put the gun down. Put the [expletive] gun down. Go back. Put the [expletive] gun down, Ryan. Put the gun down. He has a gun, move back. Ryan move back. Pat, get out of the door. Put the gun down. County 26, we got an armed male."

The body camera footage records Mota abruptly moving to his right.

"He has it pointed, yo move back."

Mota then fires five rounds while moving to his right and calling out,

“Shots fired! Put the gun down.”

When interviewed after the shooting, Mota said Ryan told him, “I told you not to [expletive] with me” and pointed the gun in the direction of the officers.

Best’s body camera footage captured Shirey saying, “[Expletive] you think I’m kidding.”

Mota said he was trying to retreat when he saw Shirey move toward him with the gun raised and pointed. Mota said he fired out of fear for his own life. Shirey was hit five times in his head and abdomen.

Body camera footage shows the gun on the floor at Shirey’s feet after the gunshots rang out. Mota, Dumansky-Potak and Best then called for EMS and tried to render aid to Shirey.

Dumansky-Potak and Best were behind a closed door and did not witness firsthand Mota’s encounter with Shirey. Karl Shirey’s view was also blocked by a furnace and chimney.

Shortly after the shooting, Jeff Purdon, a spokesperson for the Shirey family, said the family was devastated by the loss and did not believe Shirey was intent on hurting anyone. Purdon said the 27-year-old could become paranoid by the presence of law enforcement and the family wished police had not cornered Shirey in the basement.

In a Tuesday statement in response to Martin’s findings, the family said, “Guns only escalate situations. If walking gun-first into a tense situation with an obviously troubled person is by the books, the books need to be rewritten.”

“In this time of great loss, the outpouring of support from not only our friends and family, but also the surrounding community has touched us deeper than words can express,” the statement said.