

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

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing February 28, 2021

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

“The family and close friends find ourselves thinking of the countless ways this situation could have been de-escalated. What he needed was treatment, and what he received was a death sentence in a chaotic encounter with law enforcement.”

If we want an example of the kind of situation gone wrong that Gadfly has chronicled in these pages for the past 8 months, we don't have to go far.

Just to Catasauqua nine days ago.

The scenario is so familiar that the *Morning Call* reporters could almost just look up a previous shooting, change the name and address, and file their story.

Domestic disturbance. Man having a heated argument with his ex-girlfriend. She calls the police. Certainly we are told that domestic disturbance calls are among the most dangerous of situations for the police. But the police have been to this house before. They know this man. They know his history of mental problems.

Three police arrive. The man has had no gun. When the police arrive, he goes to the cellar to get one. The police confront him there. He refuses an order to drop the gun. They shoot him. The man is dead.

The family grieves, describes what a good and harmless man their loved one was, blames the police for not de-escalating, blames the system for unresponsiveness to a person in need.

Now that's as far as the story has gone so far, but we can write the rest of it, can't we?

The police say they were acting in self-defense, the police say they were following their training, the police say the man was at fault for not obeying their order, the D.A. presses no charges, the man's family sues (and sometimes even the same lawyer shows up to represent them — like the omnipresent Benjamin Crump these days if the subject is Black), the case is settled for Big Bucks, the taxpayer shells out.

Can we not agree that this is a bad outcome for everybody, *for everybody*, and that we need to figure out a better way to handle such situations?

Can we not agree that just possibly a sensible re-imagining of the way public safety is done in certain situations and circumstances might avoid unnecessary loss of life?

selections from Sarah M. Wojcik, "Man with gun shot and killed by Catasauqua police, officer placed on administrative leave." Morning Call, February 19, 2021.

A man arguing with his ex-girlfriend was shot and killed by a Catasauqua police officer Friday after he refused to drop a gun in the basement of the home he shared with his parents, authorities said.

Ryan Shirey, 27, was pronounced dead by the Lehigh County coroner's office at the home at 133 S. 14th St., where he was shot shortly after 2 p.m.

Shirey and his father and ex-girlfriend were at the house when she called police during an argument that the father told police got "heated," Martin said. The ex-girlfriend is a caretaker for Shirey's mother, he said.

Three Catasauqua police officers responded to the home, at which point Shirey "fled to the basement where he retrieved a revolver," Branosky said.

Police entered the basement.

“[Shirey] was ordered to put the gun down, he did not comply,” Martin said. “And a Catasauqua police officer shot him, and unfortunately he is deceased.”

Sarah M. Wojcik, “Man shot to death by Catasauqua police battled mental health issues and encounter should not have ended in ‘death sentence,’ family says.” Morning Call, February 23, 2021.

Ryan Shirey, the 27-year-old man shot to death Friday by Catasauqua police, was “in a heightened paranoid state” when officers responded to a 911 call at the home he shared with his parents, but the encounter should not have ended in a death sentence, his family says.

A statement released by family member Jeff Purdon said Shirey battled mental health issues his entire adult life after being diagnosed during his childhood, and was in need of treatment, not a use of force from police who were called to the home for a domestic argument.

“There are no words to accurately describe the pain of this sudden loss, the anguish at times unbearable,” the family said in the statement. “He is a victim of a system that failed him. A system that made it impossible to get the treatment and help that he so desperately needed.

“Those of us who knew Ryan know he posed no mortal threat to anyone,” the statement said. “The family and close friends find ourselves thinking of the countless ways this situation could have been de-escalated. What he needed was treatment, and what he received was a death sentence in a chaotic encounter with law enforcement.”

Purdon said Catasauqua police had been at the home in the past, and the department should have been aware of Shirey’s mental health issues. The presence of law enforcement could trigger his paranoia, Purdon said.

“I feel like there was no compassion, no understanding [from police] going in,” Purdon said. “We have no idea what was running through his head. Nobody gets to know what his last thoughts were.”

Shirey's family said they hope the Catasauqua police will consider how the incident could have been better handled considering Shirey's mental health issues made him a "vulnerable member of this community."

According to Shirey's obituary, he loved animals, something family friend Scott Rossi said was evident anytime Shirey was near a four-legged creature.

When Rossi was moving across the country in 2006, Shirey agreed to watch his cat, Scooter, for awhile. The two got so close that Rossi thought it best to let them stay together.

"They had such a bond. It was unreal," Rossi said.

More recently, Shirey agreed to watch Rossi's dog while he was at work. He'd come home and find them both curled up on the couch together, snoring away. Rossi said his dog had its own special tail wag dance whenever it laid eyes on Shirey.

"He probably understood animals better than he understood people," Purdon said.

Shirey's battle with mental health issues was constant, but according to family and friends, he could find solace "in digital spaces" and the myriad interests that would snag his attention.

Shirey spent countless hours creating electronic music, but was very private about the art and wouldn't share his creations, Purdon said. Regardless, the comfort Shirey found in his music was clear to anyone who knew him, Purdon said.

His ability to become hyperfocused meant he'd dive deep into a subject once it caught his attention, according to Purdon. And he felt strongly about some of the issues, such as his support for the decriminalization of marijuana, family said.

Purdon recalled how for a period of time, Shirey would haul a tome about coding with him wherever he went, though he never seemed to be reading it.

“It was more like this physical reminder that this was something he had to get into and learn about at some point,” Purdon said.

Purdon also said Shirey loved to spend time surfing Google Maps and touring the halls of far-away museums online with his father, Karl Shirey.

“It was like he was in his own little world sometimes,” Purdon said. “And we were all just guests.”

“This world is poorer for Ryan’s absence,” Rossi said. “He will be greatly missed, and we will spend the rest of our lives working for justice for Ryan.”