

Police, media smear Detroit man killed by security guards

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In the aftermath of last week's demonstration by 7,000 protesters against the killing of a black worker by security guards at a suburban Detroit shopping mall, the police and local news media have worked in tandem to sway public opinion against the victim and his family.

Frederick Finley, 32, died after he was assaulted on June 22 in a parking lot outside the Lord & Taylor department store at the Fairlane Town Center in Dearborn. Finley had come to the defense of his 11-year-old stepdaughter, who was being forcibly detained by five plain clothes Lord & Taylor guards for allegedly shoplifting a \$4 bracelet.

Three guards—two black and one white—threw Finley to the ground, face-first, then handcuffed him while one guard pushed his knee into Finley's neck. The same guard then used a chokehold to restrain Finley. According to an autopsy report, Finley died of asphyxiation due to neck compression.

The incident provoked an outpouring of anger, in part because Dearborn, which borders Detroit, is notorious for police harassment of blacks. Within hours of Finley's killing, without having interviewed family members of the victim who were involved in the incident, or conducting any independent investigation, the Dearborn police began leaking the security guards' one-sided version of events to the media. The first reports suggested the family were members of a shoplifting ring.

On July 5, thousands of protesters converged on the Fairlane Town Center to demand the arrest of Finley's attackers. Many carried signs declaring that a human life is worth more than a \$4 bracelet. The following day, two weeks after the killing, the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office lodged involuntary manslaughter charges against Dennis Richardson, one of the two black guards involved in the assault. Richardson was

identified as the guard who put Finley in a headlock. The 29-year-old, a fire fighter moonlighting as a security guard, faces 15 years in jail and a \$7,500 fine.

Federal officials subsequently announced they were launching a civil rights investigation into Finley's death.

Geoffrey Fieger, the family's attorney, has said the little girl was trying the bracelet on and mistakenly took it from the store. He maintains that if Lord & Taylor believed the family was shoplifting, the store should have called the police. In the event, Finley reacted to his child being forcibly detained by unknown individuals, said Fieger, who is initiating a \$600 million lawsuit against the store and the mall owners on behalf of the family.

On Friday, July 7 the Detroit news media stepped up their efforts to turn public opinion against the family and rationalize, if not justify, the killing. Detroit's ABC television affiliate broadcast portions of an interview given by another guard involved in the assault to the Christian Television Network. The reporter said 21-year-old Roderick Alexander was "hurt by the blame being hurled at him and relieved to confirm some of the suspicions reported by Dearborn Police about the Finley family."

In the interview Alexander said, "I can understand about people being angry, but the only thing that I can say is that they don't know the truth." The voiceover from the WXYZ TV reporter said while Alexander considered the death of Finley "regrettable and tragic, the Finley family only met up with guards by stealing from Lord & Taylor."

The unstated premise of the news report was that if, in fact, members of the family were guilty of shoplifting, they—not Lord & Taylor or the security guards—were to blame for Finley's death.

The rest of the Detroit media picked up this report and added other bits of information—based on what was found in the dead man's pockets—intended to generate suspicion of criminality. This included the fact that Finley—reportedly a construction worker and/or limousine driver—had \$600 in cash on his person and credit and debit cards issued in names other than his own. He also reportedly had two different Social Security cards in his name, with differing account numbers.

WWJ Radio then boasted of breaking the story that Carla Sullivan-Finley, Frederick's common law wife, had pending third-degree child abuse charges against her, stemming from an incident years ago. Ms. Finley, who had witnessed the killing of her husband just weeks before, turned herself over to the authorities Wednesday morning.

This is not the first time the victim of homicidal police or security guards has been smeared, after his death, as a criminal element. Last March Mayor Rudolph Giuliani reacted in a similar way after New York City policemen murdered Patrick Dorismond, an unarmed off-duty security guard, after Dorismond rebuffed the efforts of an undercover cop to sell him narcotics. After the killing, Mayor Giuliani released information about earlier run-ins between Dorismond and the police, including sealed juvenile arrest records.



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