

Another Detroit shopper killed in confrontation with security guard

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At around 9 a.m. Friday morning, April 6, Alwanda Gail Person-Jackson died following a scuffle with store guards at a Rite Aid pharmacy in Detroit. This was the fourth instance in less than a year that a working class Detroit resident has died following a confrontation with security guards, and this latest incident is the second violent attack on a customer at a Rite Aid store in the last two months.

The growing danger of violence and death at the hands of security guards, one of the fastest growing low-wage job sectors to develop over the past decade, has become a cause of growing concern in Detroit, which remains one of the largest poor cities in the US.

Ms. Jackson, known to her family and friends as Gail, was 36 years old, married and the mother of two daughters. She allegedly walked out of a Rite Aid pharmacy on the city's east side with a basket full of cheap cigars and hair products without paying. Detroit Homicide Detective William Rice reported that a female security guard ran out to the parking lot to stop Person-Jackson from getting into her van. The guard was reportedly assisted by a male cashier. According to the detective's account, after a struggle the two company employees dragged Person-Jackson back into the store. Once Ms. Jackson was inside the store she continued to resist and the male manager of the store joined the other two employees in subduing Jackson and handcuffing her, according to Rice.

The detective said a witness told him that when Person-Jackson continued to resist, this time freeing her hands from the cuffs, one of the employees sat on the suspect and her body went limp. Attempts to resuscitate Jackson failed and she was taken by ambulance to the hospital.

Initial reports of the April 7 autopsy performed on Person-Jackson did not indicate the immediate cause of

death and a full report is expected to take another two weeks. No one has so far been charged with criminal misconduct in her death.

Attorney Geoffrey Fieger, who is representing the Jackson family, contends Person-Jackson was dragged from her car and tied up with an electrical extension cord once the guard and other employees were inside the store.

Fieger stated he planned to file a \$1 billion lawsuit against Rite Aid. Fieger is also the attorney for three other victims of security-guard violence, including Travis Shelton, 38, killed at a Kroger supermarket on February 8; Gail Hardy, hit over the head by a Rite-Aid security guard, also in February; and Fredrick Finley, 32, killed in a Lord & Taylor parking lot in suburban Dearborn on June 22 of last year.

Family members and friends were stunned by Gail's sudden death. Her husband, Michael Jackson, said his wife suffered from diabetes and had operations on both knees following a car accident in 1997. He said often the pain in her knees became so intense, "Some days we had to carry her around on our back." Mr. Jackson said he was surprised at the charge of shoplifting because the family did not have financial problems.

At a press conference called by Geoffrey Fieger and Person-Jackson's family, Fieger commented, "Contrary to Rite Aid, merchandise is not more valuable than human life." Fieger contends that Person-Jackson was dragged out of her van by a female security guard and a male cashier, taken into the Rite Aid store and hog-tied with an electrical extension cord. Once Mrs. Jackson was in the store and continued resisting one of the employees sat on her and "suffocated" her to death, according to Fieger.

Michael Jackson spoke with outrage at the press conference on the sudden death of his spouse. "The

only thing people realize is someone was stealing, and they died. But no one was ever investigated. None of these people have any training. Do you call training tying people up with extension cords?”

Jackson said his wife had her problems, but she was a good wife and mother. “I just want to know why, why? There's a guy, a Republican, saying this is right, they are protecting themselves,” Jackson continued.

“This is becoming an epidemic,” said Rev. Horace Sheffield III, head of the Detroit chapter of Al Sharpton's National Action Network (NAN). “It has gotten totally out of hand.” Sheffield has also been involved in protests against the deaths of Travis Shelton and Frederick Finley.

Forgotten by the media, and never mentioned by the National Action Network, is the case of 43-year-old Gloria Teresa Terrell, who died following a confrontation with security guards last May 31. Ms. Terrell, an unemployed single mother of five, was caught shoplifting a pair of shoes worth only a few dollars at a Value Village second-hand store in an impoverished area of Detroit. Despite offers by other customers in the store to pay for Terrell's items, security guards allegedly threatened to send her to jail for the theft. Terrell jumped into a trash compactor to hide from the guards and was subsequently crushed to death.

In a related development, Oakland County Prosecutor David Gorcyca has rejected any consideration of criminal charges against the two Kroger security guards responsible for the death of Travis Shelton. According to Gorcyca, the two guards used appropriate force in the struggle with Shelton and Shelton was responsible for his own death.

Even though the Oakland County medical examiner ruled that Shelton's death was a homicide, due to asphyxiation by compression caused by the guard sitting on Shelton's back while he lay face-down, Gorcyca said Shelton died of asphyxiation complicated by drug use and an enlarged heart. “Mr. Shelton's own actions killed him,” stated Gorcyca. “It wasn't anything the security guards did.”

Gorcyca claimed he considered the accounts of four witnesses before he decided not to prosecute. He discounted the testimony of firefighter Sylvester Foote, who assisted the security guards by pinning down Shelton's arms. Foote said he heard Shelton say, “I can't

breathe” while guard Jason Clover sat on Shelton's back. Clover, 21 years old and 377 pounds, weighed over 100 pounds more than Shelton, who weighed about 260 pounds. Contradicting Foote's account, Gorcyca claimed witnesses told him Clover sat on Shelton's thighs, not his back. He stated Shelton died from his overweight belly blocking his air passage, and not the action of the guards. Under questioning, Gorcyca admitted that none of the other witnesses were close enough to hear Shelton except Foote, the two guards and another company employee.

Another witness not cited by Gorcyca was Joannette Quinn, a customer at the store who described in vivid detail the aggressive behavior of the security guards. At an earlier press conference, Quinn said that the guards knew Shelton and were waiting for him to advance toward the door so that they could attack him. Quinn said Shelton cowed before the two guards who choked him and then pulled his legs from under him so that the back of his head hit the floor. She said the heavier guard then sat on him for 10 minutes before the police came and noticed that he wasn't breathing.

The continued trend of violence by security guards has led several Michigan state legislators, Democrat and Republican, to call for the training of security guards in procedures for the arrest and detention of suspected shoplifters. These same politicians have often been the proponents of the “tough on crime” policy that has promoted a climate that dehumanizes the poor, especially those involved in petty or nonviolent crimes such as shoplifting.

The brutality exemplified by the security guards involved in these attacks has been shaped by years of right-wing propaganda that says that criminals are responsible for crime, and that the solution is to lock up more and more people.



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