

Two suspects confess in Tulsa, Oklahoma, shootings

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13 April 2012

Two men arrested on a tip have confessed to the shootings that killed three African-Americans and wounded two others in Tulsa, the second largest city in the state of Oklahoma, in the early morning hours of April 7.

Jacob England, 19, and Alvin Watts, 33, confessed soon after their arrest on Sunday morning. The suspects, who made a brief court appearance on April 9 via closed-circuit television, are being held on bail of more than \$9 million each, and are expected to be arraigned on April 16. They will be charged with three counts of first-degree murder as well as other crimes. The confessions reportedly implicate England in three of the shootings and Watts in the other two.

The victims, a woman and two men, were Dannaer Fields, 49; Bobby Clark, 54; and William Allen, 31. Two others were wounded, but their injuries were not life-threatening. Those shot were apparently random targets. A friend of the wounded men told the press that someone in a pickup truck “just came up and asked where a certain address was, and he told them it was down the street, and they just started shooting.”

Tulsa’s black neighborhoods, concentrated on the city’s north side, were angry and fearful in the wake the shootings, which took place amid the continuing nationwide protests over the failure of the authorities to thus far charge George Zimmerman, the Florida neighborhood watch volunteer who shot and killed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in the Orlando suburb of Sanford in late February.

Media reports discussing a possible motive for the attacks have focused on a posting on the Facebook page of one of the suspects last Thursday, less than two days before the shootings. England, who is a Native American, referred to his father’s death exactly two years earlier. Carl England had been shot and killed in a

fight after he had confronted a man who had threatened his daughter and tried to break into her home, according to the Associated Press. The man in that case was not charged with homicide after an investigation determined that self-defense was the motive, but he is in jail on weapons charges and is awaiting trial on attempted burglary.

In addition, England’s fiancée, Sheran Hart Wilde, the mother of his infant son, committed suicide about three months ago. On his Facebook page, England referred to both these events, used a racist slur to refer to the man who shot his father, and added, “It’s hard not to go off between that and sheran I’m gone in the head.”

A brother of Alvin Watts told the *Tulsa World* that he had moved in with England soon after his father died in order to help him. “I’ve never known my brother to be no racist or anything like that,” said Gene Watts. “I know he was going through a little bit of depression problems, but other than that, he’s got in little scuffles before, but he’s never went off and done this.”

Another brother, Michael Watts, said the shootings “broke our heart,” said a local television station. “If that boy done this, there’s no excuse for it,” he said. “I just want to apologize to those families. My heart goes out to them.”

A friend of the two men said she had known England since he was a child, and “from the time his father died, that boy has been somebody else.” She said he was taking medication for depression, and needed therapy “from the beginning” but didn’t receive it. There were also reports that indicated that England’s actions were a cry of suicidal despair. On April 6, a friend had warned him, in reaction to a Facebook posting that read, “It mite be the time to call it quits,” not to “do anything stupid.”

Police authorities and local prosecutors have proceeded cautiously, stating that the investigation into the shootings is still continuing. The Tulsa County district attorney said his office would file hate crimes charges in connection with the shootings “if we can figure out what the motivation was behind these killings and it sufficiently meets the elements of hate crime.”

Republican mayor Dewey Bartlett responded to the incident by reaching out to local NAACP officials, the black city councilman from Tulsa’s north side, and local preachers. The mayor called for “Operation Bridges of Faith” to help youth on the north side, asking for “brainstorming for ideas to give kids something to do this summer once school is out...baseball, softball, cheerleading, whatever it might be.” This cynical move of course said nothing about jobs for working class youth and the unemployed of all races or the protracted and increasingly desperate social crisis to which crimes like this are connected.

While the precise motives and psychological states of both suspects in the shootings are not fully known or understood, it is clear that this incident reflects the growing poverty, hopelessness and social tension that, in the absence of mass social movements, increasingly erupts in the form of social backwardness and tragedy.



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