

Trial begins for Detroit police officer who killed seven-year-old

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The trial of Joseph Weekley, the Detroit police officer charged with firing the shot that killed seven-year-old Aiyana Stanley-Jones, opened this week in Wayne County Circuit Court. Weekley is charged with both felony involuntary manslaughter and careless discharge of a firearm causing death for shooting Aiyana Jones on May 16, 2010. He was taking part in an early morning raid by a Detroit police SWAT team on an Eastside home.

The trial began Monday following the completion of jury selection and is expected to last several weeks.

The police raid was conducted to arrest Chauncey Owens, a suspect in the killing of a teenager several days earlier. An A&E network reality TV show, “The First 48,” had a camera crew recording the SWAT team actions the night of the raid. Video footage from the production was shown at the trial.

Witness testimony confirmed that a “flash-bang” grenade was thrown into the house as the SWAT team entered. This is a tactical “nonlethal” explosive device designed to disorient a target with a blinding flash of light and a loud noise. Immediately after the grenade went off, Weekley fired the fatal shot.

The murder of Aiyana Jones took place in the midst of a law-and-order frenzy on the part of both the Detroit political establishment and the media. It followed remarks by Detroit Mayor David Bing, a Democrat, who declared at the funeral of a policeman killed earlier that month in another raid, “We collectively will bring this city back and make sure that those few who disrespect the leadership in this city, the officers in this city, [know] that we’re not going to stand by and take this anymore, the madness has to stop.”

Days after the killing of Jones, thousands of people attended her funeral services. The sentiment among the mourners was one of shock and anger. While several

prominent Democratic politicians attended, Mayor Bing was noticeably absent.

Reverend Al Sharpton and several local figures such as attorney Geoffrey Fieger and the Reverend Horace Sheffield spoke. They attempted to defend the police, claiming that the death of Aiyana Jones was the product of a wave of violence on the part of young black men.

Detroit’s police chief at the time of the killing was Warren Evans. He was out of town during the raid but was responsible for both the A&E crew shadowing the SWAT team and the “shock and awe” approach to law enforcement. Evans’s forced resignation only two months after Jones’s killing was an indication of the political crisis of the Bing administration.

The juridical scope of the trial is to determine if Weekley is responsible for the death of Aiyana Jones, or, conversely, whether the killing was simply an unfortunate accident that occurred in the course of a necessary police operation.

The broader questions of the political environment that produced the killing will be obscured.

The front room in the lower flat, where the SWAT team entered, was occupied only by Aiyana and her grandmother, Mertilla Jones, who were sleeping on the couch. Mertilla Jones has yet to testify, but she stated publicly at the time of the raid that the flash-bang grenade was thrown onto the couch where Aiyana was sleeping, causing burns to her body.

A central component of Weekley’s defense is the claim that Mertilla Jones grabbed for his gun, causing him to fire. She has consistently denied that.

The testimony of Aiyana’s cousin, Mark Robinson, age 19, on Wednesday was damning. He lived at the house but was outside just prior to the police operation. As he was being forced to the ground by officers involved in the raid, he warned them that children were

inside. The warning was ignored.

The proceedings in the courtroom are being stage-managed in an attempt to put the police in the best light. For example, Weekley’s defense attorney, Steve Fishman, asked one police officer, “Would you consider Officer Weekley to be a damn good cop?” Servile media reports describe officers “fighting back tears” when they spoke about seeing Aiyana’s fatally wounded body being removed from the home.

From the time of the killing, the media has acted as apologists for the police. In response to community outrage over the death of Aiyana Jones, *Detroit Free Press* columnist Rochelle Riley went so far as to try to implicate ordinary Detroiters in the child’s death. In her column she chastised residents for failing to cooperate with the police, writing, “Embracing a zero-tolerance attitude toward crime will make it easier for police officers to do their jobs” and “make the city safer for children.” She claimed those “demanding justice” for Aiyana, were “looking for someone to blame” other than themselves.



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