

Suspect in Cleveland Facebook murder kills himself as police close in

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Steven Stephens, who on Sunday shot to death a random stranger in Cleveland, Ohio and posted the video on Facebook, killed himself Tuesday outside the city of Erie, Pennsylvania after his car was disabled by pursuing police.

Stephens died of a single gunshot to the head, fired from his own pistol, shortly after he was recognized by workers at a McDonald's drive-through window who called police. A Pennsylvania state trooper pursued Stephens, ramming his vehicle and disabling it. Stephens then took his own life.

The victim of the gruesome killing posted on Facebook was 74-year-old Robert Godwin Sr., a retired foundry worker survived by nine children, 14 grandchildren and numerous great-grandchildren. Godwin was apparently a random target, stopped by Stephens as he was walking along a sidewalk on Cleveland's east side on Easter Sunday afternoon. Both Stephens and Godwin were African-American.

Stephens demanded that the elderly man recite the name of Stephens' estranged girlfriend, and after he did so, shot him in the head while filming the scene on his cell phone. He then posted the video on his Facebook page, together with claims—apparently false—that he had shot 12 other people that day in an “Easter Sunday massacre” to avenge himself on his girlfriend.

Cleveland police detectives spoke with Stephens via cell phone after the killing and tried to persuade him to surrender. They were able to track his movements from Cleveland to Erie, 100 miles to the east, using the “pings” from the cell phone on nearby cell towers before he discarded the phone.

As in many such tragedies, it is not clear what set off the impulse to homicidal violence. Stephens had no previous criminal convictions and was working in a

position of trust, as a job counselor at Beech Brook, a local behavioral health agency that serves children, teenagers and families. He had worked at the agency for eight years and had been a mentor for young people.

He had a conflict of some kind with his girlfriend of three years, identified as Joy Lane, and told his mother on Saturday that she was seeing him for the last time. His Facebook postings also report having “lost everything” gambling at casinos in Erie and Cleveland, although it is not clear the exact role this financial disaster played in triggering his fatal actions. Stephens had a permit for concealed carry of a pistol and visited a local gun range last summer for target practice.

“We had been in a relationship for several years,” Joy Lane told CBS News in a text message. “I am sorry that all of this has happened. My heart & prayers goes out to the family members of the victim(s). Steve really is a nice guy... he is generous with everyone he knows. He was kind and loving to me and my children.”

During the nearly 48 hours that Stephens was on the run, the American media gave nonstop attention to the case, particularly emphasizing the use of Facebook to make public the horrifying images of Godwin's execution-style killing. There were repeated calls for Facebook to take stronger action to censor the content placed on its pages by subscribers.

The video of the killing was available on Facebook for about three hours before it was taken down. Facebook officials said they removed the video 23 minutes after learning of it. Several million people watched or downloaded the video during the time it was posted online.

Stephens used Facebook Live to post his confession to the killing of Godwin, while posting videos on his regular Facebook page announcing his plan to carry out the killing and showing the murder itself.

Police departments have been pressing for restrictions on Facebook Live since last summer, when Diamond Reynolds, the girlfriend of Philando Castile, live-streamed the aftermath of the police shooting of Castile as she sat with him in their car in a Minneapolis, Minnesota suburb.

An official statement by the company said that Facebook did not allow the content posted by Stephens to stay on its site. “We work hard to keep a safe environment on Facebook,” the statement said, “and are in touch with law enforcement in emergencies when there are direct threats to physical safety.”

At a conference of Facebook developers Tuesday in California, billionaire CEO Mark Zuckerberg said the company was developing artificial intelligence methods for screening postings of videos and photographs for violent content, with a view to speeding up the process of internal censorship.



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