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The Columbus Dispatch

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MA'KHIA BRYANT SHOOTING

A TRAGIC DAY



Hazel Bryant is embraced after her niece, Ma'Khia Bryant, 16, was shot and killed by a police officer on the East Side. Officers were responding to an attempted stabbing call when the shooting occurred. BROOKE LAVALLEY/COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Activist Hill turns support to Columbus

After Chauvin verdict, sees low in Bryant death

Adam Jardy Columbus Dispatch
USA TODAY NETWORK

They were pressed together so tightly that cellphone reception was rendered impossible. Standing in the throng assembled outside the courthouse in downtown Minneapolis, P.J. Hill and hundreds of others were waiting for the news they had fought for, marched for and anxiously waited nearly a year for.

But because there were so many of them anticipating the verdict in the Derek Chauvin trial, nobody could get a signal on their phones. Not Hill, not the man standing next to him who had flown in from France for the occasion, nobody.

Finally, a voice boomed out over a megaphone: "He's guilty on all three counts!"

The reaction was visceral and immediate.

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911 calls released in fatal shooting of 16-year-old girl

Bethany Bruner Columbus Dispatch
USA TODAY NETWORK

Interim Columbus police Chief Michael Woods issued a final statement at a Wednesday press conference about the shooting death of a 16-year-old girl by an officer.

"I wish to hell it hadn't happened."

Ma'Khia Bryant's death after being shot by a Columbus police officer on Tuesday afternoon has become the latest in a series of high-profile shootings by police across the county.

Activists and city leaders alike called for reform, both with police policy and in efforts to curb the rising violence in Columbus.

As more information was being released about the shooting, which occurred around 4:45 p.m. Tuesday on the 3100 block of Legion Lane, Ohio State University students were staging a sit-in on campus and about 500 students marched down High Street.

Bryant died at a nearby hospital on Tuesday after she was shot by an officer who was responding to a call about an attempted stabbing.

Woods said Wednesday that police



Interim Columbus Police Chief Michael Woods addresses media during a press conference about the events surrounding the death of Ma'Khia Bryant, who was killed on Tuesday. JOSHUA A. BICKEL/COLUMBUS DISPATCH

had received a 911 call about the attempted stabbing that brought officers to the scene. Police had not established as of Wednesday who placed that call.

In that call at 4:32 p.m. Tuesday, screaming can be heard as the caller asks police to come and says someone is trying to stab them. The police dispatcher tries to get more information

and there is screaming before the call is disconnected.

A second 911 call, placed around 4:48 p.m., resulted in the caller hanging up after seeing a police cruiser on the scene.

Columbus police Officer Nicholas Reardon, hired in December 2019, was the first officer on scene and was identified Wednesday as the officer who shot Bryant.

Reardon's body camera showed what played out when he arrived on the scene.

There were multiple people in the driveway of the home and the video shows Bryant with a knife in hand and making a movement toward another young woman, who falls backwards to the ground at the officer's feet.

Bryant then turns and moves toward another young woman, who is up against the hood of a sedan parked in the driveway. The video shows Bryant holding the knife and moving it in a motion that appears to be an attempt to swing the knife at the young woman's upper body.

See BRYANT, Page 4A

Verdict relief punctured by latest police shooting

Céilí Doyle Columbus Dispatch
USA TODAY NETWORK

Zach Usmani gripped his phone, shoulders hunched over the steering wheel as he sat in his parked car outside a gym in Columbus. He was watching a video livestream when Hennepin County Judge Peter Cahill read the verdict in the trial of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin.

Guilty. Guilty. Guilty.

Wow, Usmani thought, as Chauvin was convicted on two counts of murder and one count of manslaughter in the death of George Floyd while Chauvin had him handcuffed with a knee on his neck.

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Following the guilty verdict of Derek Chauvin in the killing of George Floyd and the subsequent death of 16-year-old Ma'Khia Bryant in a Columbus Police-involved shooting, protesters march through the streets of downtown Columbus on Tuesday. ADAM CAIRNS/COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Bryant

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Reardon is heard saying "Get down" multiple times and then fires his weapon.

Four shots are heard – but police have not confirmed whether additional shots were fired – and Bryant falls to the ground. Officers provided medical aid to Bryant at the scene until paramedics arrived. She was taken to a nearby hospital, where she died at 5:21 p.m.

Minutes after the shooting, people began to gather and yell at Reardon and two other officers on scene, Serge Akpalo and Eric Channel, both of whom were hired in 2014. The protests grew throughout Tuesday night.

Franklin County Children Services confirmed Tuesday that Bryant had been in foster care under their custody.

Donavon Brinson, who lives across the street from the foster home, saw some girls come out of that house and then he heard commotion.

"They were calling each other the B-word so I figured it was just a girl fight," Brinson said.

He went inside. Then the police arrived, and he heard four shots. He peeked out his laundry room window and saw the aftermath – 16-year-old Bryant shot and dying on the ground.

He immediately thought about his security camera on his garage. He watched the footage. He saw the fight, saw the glint of the knife.

And while what happened is tragic, Brinson said, it all happened so fast that he didn't see how the officer could have time to have done anything else.

"If the officer hadn't done what he did, I think we'd have two girls dead," he said. "It was violent and all just happened so fast."

The foster mother answered the door of her home Wednesday morning, but said only that she was at work when the shooting happened and that she didn't want to talk more.

Mayor Andrew J. Ginter said Wednesday that Bryant's death has highlighted issues across the Columbus community that need addressing.

"The fact that we had a 16-year-old armed and involved in physical violence, that's something for us to look in the mirror and say, 'What are we doing,'" Ginter said. "What else can we be doing?"

Ginter said the independent investigation being conducted by the Ohio Bureau of Criminal Investigation will determine if Reardon acted appropriately.

"Bottom line: Did Ma'Khia Bryant need to die yesterday? How did we get here?" Ginter said. "This is a failure on the part of our community. Some are guilty, but all of us are responsible."

Tuesday's shooting happened about 20 minutes before the guilty verdict was announced in the trial of Derek Chauvin, a former Minneapolis police officer convicted of all three charges (two counts of murder and one count of man-



Flowers are seen in front of the home on Legion Lane where a Columbus police officer shot and killed Ma'Khia Bryant. FRED SQUILLANTE/COLUMBUS DISPATCH



Columbus Mayor Andrew J. Ginter speaks about the shooting. JOSHUA A. BICKEL/COLUMBUS DISPATCH

slaughter) in George Floyd's death.

Bryant's death on the day of the conviction in the Floyd case prompted protests Tuesday night at the scene of the shooting and Downtown.

Many of the protests and questions circulating around the shooting have centered on police training and when using a firearm versus another method, such as a Taser, is more effective or possible.

Woods said firearms training dictates that an officer fires until the threat is over. He has said the use of force is authorized if the safety of the officer or a third person is jeopardized.

Down the street from where the shooting took place, Ira Graham III was working from home on Wednesday. He works in registration at Ohio State University's James Cancer Hospital and also is a photographer and videographer.

Graham has lived in the neighborhood for 19 years. He did not know Bryant but had seen her walking down the street at times.

He said he heard the gunshots Tuesday afternoon. Graham went down to the house and saw officers performing CPR on Bryant.

Graham said he saw the video from the police body camera of Bryant's actions.

"I believe in truth and facts. Video doesn't lie," he said. "She was in full attack mode."

"She needed to be stopped at that point," Graham said. "That young lady's life was at stake."

On Wednesday, the White House and celebrities such as actress Blake Lively and singer Kehlani issued statements and calls for reform after Bryant's death.

The White House called Ma'Khia's shooting "tragic."

"She was a child," President Joe Biden's press secretary, Jen Psaki, told reporters Wednesday. "We're thinking of her friends and family in the communities that are hurting and grieving her loss. We know that police violence disproportionately impacts Black and Latino people in communities and that Black women and girls, like Black men and boys, experience higher rates of police violence. We also know that there are particular vulnerabilities that children in foster care, like Ma'Khia, face."

Psaki noted that Ma'Khia's death came "just as America was hopeful of a step forward after the traumatic and exhausting trial of Derek Chauvin and the verdict that was reached."

The White House is focused on addressing systemic racism and bias "head on" and passing laws that will put in place reforms at police departments around the country, Psaki said.

City leaders have reacted with continued calls for police reform. City Council President Shannon Hardin spoke Tuesday night, about 40 minutes after Bryant had died, at a virtual meeting to gather information about the civilian review board members. At that time, which was prior to the release of the body camera footage, Hardin said transparency was paramount.

"The truth is that nothing that we will do will bring this young baby girl back," Hardin said. "Nothing will stop the fam-

"Bottom line: Did Ma'Khia Bryant need to die yesterday? How did we get here? This is a failure on the part of our community. Some are guilty, but all of us are responsible."

Mayor Andrew J. Ginter

ily from grieving."

Wednesday morning, Hardin issued a statement saying that police need to change training so that "guns are not the final answer to every threat."

"We must implement a new vision of safety in Columbus," he said.

Ginter called the situation "tragic," and said releasing the body camera footage so quickly on Tuesday was to be transparent with the public. Ginter also touted his plan to upgrade the division's body cameras following the shooting of Andre Hill in December.

Columbus Public Safety Director Ned Pettus Jr. called the shooting a "horrendous tragedy."

"But the video shows us there is more to this," Pettus said. He urged people to be patient. He said the city needs to ask what information the officer had and how much time did he have to process it and act.

"And what would have happened if he had taken no action at all," Pettus said. "We don't yet have those answers."

What happens now?

As is now city policy, the Ohio Bureau of Criminal Investigation is conducting a criminal investigation into Tuesday's shooting. BCI, which is overseen by the Ohio Attorney General's office, will then pass their findings to a prosecutor – either the AG's office or the Franklin County prosecutor – for consideration before a grand jury.

Once that process is completed, police will conduct an internal review to determine whether the officers who responded acted within policy.

The shooting could also be reviewed by the city's Civilian Review Board. That board, whose members are set to be approved by City Council in the coming weeks, has not yet determined a structure for what cases will be reviewed and how those reviews will be conducted.

Woods said the Columbus Division of Police will cooperate with BCI's investigation.

Mayor Andrew J. Ginter said police will release the information they can, but they do not want to jeopardize the investigation.

Dispatch reporters Holly Zachariah and Mark Ferenchik and USA Today reporter Michael Collins contributed to this story.

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Former Ohio State basketball player P.J. Hill, center, leads a protest through downtown Minneapolis during the summer of 2020. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY P.J. HILL

Hill

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"Literally, people just started jumping up and down," Hill said. "It's like, 'Wow, God is good, man.' I hugged a guy and he just started crying on my shoulder. I don't even know these people but it just feels like America was on trial and America showed up for the first time."

It was a watershed moment for a man like Hill, a Minneapolis native and former Ohio State basketball player who has found himself at the forefront of the movement in Minneapolis after the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Chauvin in May. Leaning on his belief that everyone has to do their part to affect social change, and drawing on his wide range of contacts as a former athlete and current financial advisor, Hill quickly found a role as a community leader and spokesman for a city clamoring for change.

That started in May, when he began filming the aftermath of the violence that erupted after Floyd's death. It led to a phone call from a family friend, encouraging him to make his presence felt throughout the city. In short order, Hill was addressing crowds of thousands and leading marches across the Hennepin Avenue Bridge.

A vice president for the Minneapolis NAACP, Hill describes himself as a "ser-



Minneapolis native P.J. Hill, a former Ohio State basketball player, speaks at a protest in Minneapolis after the murder of George Floyd during the summer of 2020.

vant leader" whose skills as a point guard help him bridge gaps and bring people together even in times of crisis. It was all put to the test as, together, hundreds of people stood awaiting the verdict.

"What you saw is people hopeful but uncertain, because it's never been

done," he said. "We're in uncharted territory. You spend a whole year fighting in the streets. We damn near burned the city down to make a point. The war is still going on, but we won this battle, and I'm just grateful."

The 48 hours leading up to the reading of the verdict had been filled with meetings for Hill. He spoke with Derrick Johnson, national president of the NAACP, the mayors of Minneapolis and St. Paul, and even the Rev. Jesse Jackson. There were conversations with the national guard about protecting First Amendment rights and stopping the use of tear gas, and meetings with Minneapolis police chief Medaria Arradondo about reimagining policing within the city.

Those meetings represent just a small sample of what occurred before the verdict for Hill, who also made time to wake up at 5 a.m. Monday to play basketball. Throughout, Hill said the message was one of hope that justice would prevail and history would remember this moment as a movement.

"This is a watershed moment," he said. "You feel joy. You feel hope. You feel some sort of liberation that we took a step forward today. And now how do we hug on each other, love on each other and take our allies in close and move forward?"

The feeling of victory was short-lived, though. Hill said he got home from dinner with his wife, who is due with

their second child, and his daughter when the focus quickly turned to Columbus and the fatal shooting of Black 16-year-old Ma'Khia Bryant by a white police officer.

"I come back and was just trying to unwind and think about how can I support my people from Columbus now, because it's just never-ending," Hill said. "I would tell the people of Columbus that you are not alone, that Minneapolis and the NAACP stands in solidarity. We are going to fight with you so that justice is served in their communities, in their state, just like it was here in Minneapolis."

Hill is a devoted man of faith, and his great uncle is a senior pastor at a church located across the street from where Floyd was killed. Hill is quick to quote a verse of scripture from what he refers to as "The Good Book" and, in reflecting on his own path, he quoted Proverbs 19:21: "Many are the plans in the man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that will prevail for your life."

That purpose, on a day with such extremes like on Tuesday, remains unchanged.

"Black people are fatigued, man," Hill said. "But you know what keeps me fighting is that I've got a daughter, that I've got God in my life and hopes that I can make this world a better place for my daughter."

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Shooting

Continued from Page 1A

The 32-year-old said he felt relieved, but not satisfied.

"I hope people recognize this is not enough and this alone is not justice," he said.

A half-hour later, news broke that Columbus police had shot and killed a 16-year-old Black girl on the Southeast Side after responding to a 911 call at 4:35 p.m. Tuesday about an attempted stabbing.

The deep sighs of relief, drawn by the Black community, protesters, activists and allies across Columbus after Chauvin's guilty verdict were punctured by news of another fatal police shooting.

"The police just can't stop themselves from killing Black people even with all the attention on this," Usmani said. "Relief is just so tepid. It's tepid because I know this does not protect the next person from getting shot, protect the next person from being brutalized."

Body camera video released by Columbus police Tuesday night shows an officer approaching a driveway with a group of young people standing around. In the video, it appears that the 16-year-old, identified as Ma'Khia Bryant, pushes or swings at a person who falls to the ground.

Bryant then appears to swing a knife at a girl who is on the hood of a car, and the officer fires his weapon what sounds like four times, striking the girl.

'Doomed to keep repeating these tragedies'

Ramon Obey II, an activist and president of JUST (Justice, Unity & Social Transformation), a community organization that hosts a biweekly food program, watched the Chauvin verdict on TV with his mom, sister and younger brother.



Protestors march Downtown Tuesday following a fatal police shooting earlier in the afternoon on the city's Southeast Side. A teenage girl was shot and killed as officers responded to an attempted stabbing call. ADAM CAIRNS/COLUMBUS DISPATCH

"We were very unsure on how this would turn out," he said, recalling how his mom remembered being glued to the TV almost 30 years ago after the officers who beat Rodney King were acquitted.

The 23-year-old described the feeling of hearing a guilty verdict to the butterflies in your stomach that drop while riding a rollercoaster.

"I'm flabbergasted," he said. "It's honestly like the words can't come to me quick enough, because even though I've seen a man murdered on video, I didn't know if America had seen a man murdered on video."

But his excitement was short-lived. After hearing news of the police shooting in Columbus on Tuesday, Obey said he was unsurprised.

"The system of policing is broken, and until change takes place we are doomed to keep repeating these tragedies," he said.

The question of justice is subjective,

Heather Johnson said.

Johnson, a fellow activist and mother of six, said that no guilty verdict will ever justify what happened to Floyd or the shooting death of the girl on Tuesday.

"How do you justify murdering a 15-year-old? How do you justify that? That is a child," the 32-year-old said. "There is never a reason to justify Columbus police officers murdering our children." (Initial reports from a woman who said she was Bryant's aunt said the girl was 15.)

Fighting for change in Columbus

Despite the whirlplash of watching the jury hand down Chauvin's guilty verdict minutes after a Columbus officer shot and killed another Black person, activists including Usmani, Obey and Johnson said the future is worth fighting for.

Usmani, a social worker at elemen-

tary school in Linden, said he found the Columbus City Council's efforts to establish an alternative crisis response unit, promising, but not sufficient.

He said he hopes the Reimagine Safety initiative will eventually establish a program in which mental health care professionals respond to non-violent 911 calls.

"As a social worker, I don't know what I'd do if I was called into to someone having a heart attack," he said. "For cops to be called in for someone in the middle of an addiction crisis or having a mental health episode ... that's just not what they do."

Obey agreed, and said that the broken system of policing is rooted in not financially prioritizing the education, housing and health care above the police.

He also called for renewed unity among Columbus social justice organizations and advocates to pressure elected officials to eliminate qualified immunity, the law that protects government officials, including law enforcement officers, from civil suits.

"Police officers who may feel like they're being indicted based off of the current time we're living in, they must first ask themselves how they even got to that point and if they were doing what they were supposed to do when they signed up for a badge," he said.

"Good officers have nothing to be scared of," he added.

Obey said she still has hope for a better tomorrow - a cautious hope that's shared by Johnson.

"If I didn't have hope I wouldn't still be out here," Johnson said. "That's honestly my answer. The reason why I continue to press on and continue to try and be in this fight with my brothers and sisters ... I'm in this fight and this struggle because I don't want my six kids to be in this fight and struggle."

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