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MOCANAQUA SHOOTING

OFFICIALS: COPS' DECISION TO FIRE WEAPONS WAS JUSTIFIED
POLICE, VICTIM'S GIRLFRIEND'S STORIES DIFFER

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Article Text:

CONYNGHAM TWP. - Authorities say a state trooper was justified in fatally shooting Eddie Vega.

But Vega's girlfriend, who witnessed the shooting, says she doesn't understand why it had to happen.

Christina Shatrousky said she held her boyfriend as he lay bleeding from a chest wound and screamed for help as his pulse began to fade.

Shatrousky said she doesn't know how the situation escalated out of control or why state troopers did not focus on other, less extreme measures.

The shooting came after a slow foot chase through Mocanaqua streets and yards, Shatrousky said. During the chase, Vega shouted obscenities at the troopers and swung at them with a rake and a tree branch. She believes Vega was trying to stop the troopers from arresting him, and reacting to being sprayed with a chemical irritant.

"It was like a game of cat and mouse," she said. "They never tried to get him on the ground, never tried to handcuff him."

The chase ended when Trooper Garry Bat fired a single shot Wednesday afternoon as Vega "wildly and violently" swung a heavy metal rake at two troopers, according to District Attorney David Lupas.

Lupas said Vega, 36, refused repeated commands to drop his weapon.

Troopers Bat and Stanley Betkoski arrived at Shatrousky's Italy Street home at about 5:15 p.m. on a report of a domestic disturbance. Authorities say Vega and Shatrousky's mother both called police to the residence.

At the scene, the troopers learned Vega had shoved Shatrousky, violating a no-hit protection from abuse order. Troopers approached Vega as he sat on the porch to take him into custody. Shatrousky said Vega then went to get something out of his car and lock the vehicle. She said she heard Vega yell "you don't have to grab me like that."

Vega quickly walked away from the officers and went behind a row of nearby houses. The officers followed and caught up with Vega on the side of Italy Street.

There, Vega picked up a branch and began swinging it at the troopers. Both Shatrousky, who lived with Vega for a year until their recent separation, and Lupas agree Vega picked up the branch, but differ on what happened next.

Lupas said Vega picked up a broken, jagged branch and tried to strike the officers with it.

Shatrousky, 23, said Vega picked up a thin, leafy branch to try to block Mace sprayed by the

troopers.

State Police Captain Carmen Altavilla acknowledged one of the troopers sprayed Mace while trying to subdue Vega. He said it was the first step in a number of attempts troopers made to subdue Vega during the 20-minute altercation.

Lupas said the troopers also used their batons, striking Vega several times, but Vega again pulled away from troopers.

Shatrousky said Vega broke free and walked about 100 feet to the garage behind Shatrousky's home. There, he grabbed the heavy, metal rake and began swinging it, calling the troopers a ``bunch of punks."

She said Vega swung the rake at waist level and only did so to try to keep the troopers away from him, adding that he was blinded by the mace.

Shatrousky screamed at Vega to drop the rake and heard the troopers also tell him to do so three times. Lupas said Vega failed to comply and continued swinging the rake, once striking Betkoski in the arm.

Then, standing 8 to 10 feet away from Vega, Bat fired the shot. Betkoski was only a few feet away from Vega at the time.

Shatrousky disputed Lupas' scenario, saying Vega dropped the rake just prior to the shooting. Lupas rebutted her account. He said he has interviews from three witnesses who said Vega continued to swing at the heads of the troopers.

After the shooting, Shatrousky ran to her boyfriend, holding him in her arms, screaming for help. Shatrousky said she wanted to perform CPR on Vega but didn't know if it was safe for her to try. Shatrousky, who works as a home nurses aid, worried that blowing air into his lungs ``would make things worse," or cause him to bleed more.

Troopers ignored her initial screams, she said, but later told her not to perform CPR. Minutes later, members of Shickshinny Ambulance arrived and began CPR, but it was too late. He was pronounced dead in the ambulance, Altavilla said.

Altavilla said troopers could not perform CPR on Vega because he was still breathing until the ambulance crew arrived.

At a press conference Friday, Altavilla said the troopers ``operated exactly as they were trained." He stressed officers are authorized to use deadly force when needed to protect themselves or others from what they believe to be an imminent threat of death or serious bodily injury.

Betkoski was taken to Berwick Hospital Wednesday after being struck with the rake. He was treated and released, Altavilla said.

Bat and Betkoski did not attend the press conference to answer questions. A later attempt to reach them for comment was unsuccessful. Both troopers continue to work at the Shickshinny Barracks but will remain on administrative duties for a few days, Altavilla said.

The whole scenario leaves Shatrousky puzzled, questioning why her boyfriend had to die. She also said she worries that Vega's ethnicity might have played a role in the incident.

Shatrousky said Vega had just returned to the house Wednesday afternoon after doing a roofing job and wanted to pick up his belongings. She said Vega, who was 5 foot 9 and weighed 145 to 150 pounds, was wearing only shorts at the time of the altercation.

She acknowledged that she and Vega did not have a fairytale relationship. During their five-year

relationship there were arguments, and fights - with both throwing punches and scratching at each other.

She filed a PFA against Vega in May after he threw her on a bed and began choking her during an altercation. In the PFA she also wrote that Vega had pushed her down stairs, broke her nose and kicked her.

She also stressed that many of those incidents were from several years ago. ``We loved to hate each other, we argued all the time," she said Friday.

And, while Vega might not have been the best boyfriend, he was a good father to the couple's two children, ages three and 1 1/2.

``He would have done anything for them," she said. ``He would always take them to amusement parks, buy them toys from the Disney store. He just put up a swimming pool for them in the back yard."

Caption:

TIMES LEADER STAFF PHOTO/CLARK VAN ORDEN

Red and purple flowers mark the spot on Italy street where Eddie Vega fell after being fatally shot by a state trooper on Wednesday. Vega's girlfriend, Christina Shatrousky, said the flowers were a Mother's Day gift from Vega.

TIMES LEADER STAFF PHOTO/CLARK VAN ORDEN

Eddie Vega, 36, was shot and killed during an altercation with state troopers on Wednesday afternoon. Vega is pictured with one of two children he had with girlfriend Christina Shatrousky.

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