



Commentary

A strange and tragic cover-up

by Kevin C. Morris

"I was just scared," said the skinny black teenager — the bottom left corner of his face covered in white bandages and gauze — as he recounted the events last Dec. 30 when he was shot in the face by a white Kansas City police officer.

There he lay face down on the cold concrete of 25th and Jackson just steps away from his home, bleeding, trembling, hands out-stretched, his mother's screams echoing eerily above him out of sight, un comforted by her loving arms.

Though the facts remain in dispute that night, the smoky haze of police misinformation and press incompetence have begun to dissolve into a more frightening picture of police criminality and press complicity, especially in light of the recent court ruling that cleared the boy and implicated the cop.

Looking back, the accounts of the incident that night — like black and white — could not have been more different. According to the police, a white police officer saw a 15-year-old black boy with a gun, the officer jumped out of the cruiser, gave chase, identified himself, ordered the boy to drop the gun, and then shot the boy in the face as he turned and pointed the gun at the cop.

Subsequently, the police determined that the boy had been carrying a BB gun and the police officer sustained no injuries during the incident.

witnessed in my eleven years of involvement in Jackson County courts."

While I may understand why the police department, the courts and prosecutors office (which are systemically aligned against young black defendants) fail to recognize the gravity of this case, I can scarcely fathom the deafening silence of The Kansas City Star, whose reporting on this case has been limp and tilted to the side of the police. In addition, The Star wrote differing accounts of the incident and printed a photo of a BB gun as if to bolster the police's claim that the cop was threatened by a realistic weapon.

Consistent with its usual editorial policy, The Star never questioned the inconsistencies in the police account, such as the phantom chase that began and ended in the same spot; the illogical placement of the BB gun after the shooting and credible rebuttals from the parents. And since the court ruling supporting the boy's contention that he never pointed the BB gun at the police officer, The Star has ignored the real and very serious story of a white cop who nearly killed an innocent black boy. One wonders if the coverage would have been the same if the black boy's head had been blown off?

The true victims of this tragic nightmare have all but ignored: the teenage black boy who will always hide the scars on his face and on his psyche as he recalls that near-fatal night; his twin brother who — with him — is afraid to walk outside their home; and the angry, frustrated mother and father who — raped by our legal system — simply cannot understand the lack of outrage. Their recourse: to sue the city and the police department to get that mythical justice for all.

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Nonetheless, the police arrested the child, threatened to arrest his screaming mother, handcuffed him to a hospital bed overnight, and charged him with assaulting a police officer for pointing the BB gun. Despite a raft of inconsistencies in the initial police report, police spokesman Capt. Cy Ritter said just days after this incident that the "police stood by their report."

In a repudiation of the police department, a juvenile court judge ruled last month that the wounded boy did not point a gun at the cop, thus exonerating the accused boy and bolstering his claim that after dropping the BB gun, he turned around to surrender and was then shot in the face by the police officer. However, the judge ruled the boy did flee the officer though the boy was not committing a crime when police initially saw him. The ruling further muddles the police department's justification for shooting, and nearly killing, the innocent black child.

If the boy didn't point a gun at the cop, you may naturally ask, then what did happen that night? Why did the cop shoot? And more importantly, why — in light of the court's ruling — does the Kansas City Police Department (and by extension the Jackson County prosecutor) turn a blind eye to lethal law enforcement tactics directed at children?

In fact, Dale Close, the department's legal advisor, said after the boy's acquittal: "Our review of the file still indicates the officer acted properly and in accordance with the law."

A recent interview with the boy's attorney, John Picerno, revealed some startling facts that emerged during court proceedings. To begin, this whole incident was precipitated by good old-fashioned white racist stereotypes. In court depositions, the white cop stated that when he first saw the twin teenagers (before sighting the BB gun), he considered them "suspicious, out of place" and suspected them of "selling narcotics" even though they were black boys in a black neighborhood less than a block from home.

Strangely, the white cop's black partner saw nothing more than "two kids hanging out." In another startling revelation, the white rookie-cop who had previously worked for the Kansas Department of Corrections, had sought and gained employment in the infamous Los Angeles Police Department because, in his words, it is the "premier law enforcement agency in the country."

So what do we have here? A Mark Furhman wannabe targeting black children in Kansas City?

Furthermore, the white cop, in an attempt to fit the facts with his fables, gave conflicting testimony about the placement of the BB gun which contradicted his initial statement to the reporting officer and the detective who took his typed and signed statement three hours after the incident.

Said Picerno, "This case represents the most offensive conduct I have