



Attorney: Corey Jones didn't fire his gun

Yamiche Alcindor, USA TODAY 3:28 p.m. EDT October 22, 2015



A Florida man is shot and killed on the side of the road by a police officer after his car breaks down. While there are still many questions in this case, there are things we do know about what happened during those early morning hours. VPC

The family of a Florida church drummer shot dead while waiting by his disabled car say they want to know exactly what led a plainclothes police officer to kill him early Sunday morning.

Corey Jones' father, stepmother, older brother and younger sister told USA TODAY the 31-year-old was a jokester who fell in love with drumming as a 3-year-old and later bought a gun for protection. The family's attorney says that based on information he's received from the state attorney, Corey Jones never fired his weapon Sunday morning. Now, they are all searching for answers as details about the fatal shooting begin to emerge.

The Palm Beach Gardens Police Department says officer Nouman Raja got out of his car to investigate what he thought was an abandoned vehicle and was suddenly confronted by "an armed subject" who the officer then shot dead. Authorities say a gun was found on the scene.

Family members of Corey Jones, the African-American church drummer who was shot and killed by an off-duty police officer in Florida spoke at a news conference. AP

Jones was licensed to carry a weapon and bought his first gun about a year-and-a-half ago to protect himself because he often played late-night gigs and carried a lot of expensive equipment, his sister Melissa Jones, 29, said. That first gun was later stolen so Jones bought another gun by making monthly payments, finally picking it up three days before his death, she said.

"He was very responsible with his gun," Jones, a hairdresser who lives in Tallahassee, said. "He told me I should go ahead and get a concealed weapon because I have clients going in and out of my house and I don't know them. I have money that I am dealing with. So he said, 'for protection get a gun and get the license that you need.'"

The shooting happened around around 3:15 a.m. after a gig by the Future Prezidents, the band Jones played with, in Jupiter early on Sunday morning. On his way home to Boynton Beach, Jones' SUV broke down near an interchange on I-95. He called one of his fellow band members for help, who then called roadside assistance after being unable to get the vehicle started.

In a statement on Facebook, the Palm Beach Gardens Police Department said, "Nouman Raja, on duty in a plain clothes capacity, in an unmarked police vehicle, stopped to investigate what he believed to be an abandoned vehicle. As the officer exited his vehicle, he was suddenly confronted by an armed subject. As a result of the confrontation, the officer discharged his firearm, resulting in the death of the subject."

Raja, 38, was not wearing a body camera, and none of the department's squad cars are fitted with dashboard cameras. He has been placed on paid administrative leave.

Benjamin Crump, an attorney for Jones' family, told USA TODAY that based on information he's received from Palm Beach County State Attorney Dave Aronberg, Corey Jones at some point ran away and did not fire his weapon Sunday night. "He never fired his gun," Crump said. "The officer fired six times. It is very troubling on many levels why he felt the need to shoot Corey those many times and Corey didn't feel the need to ever pull his trigger to shoot at the cop."

He added that Jones likely died without understanding that the fatal bullet was fired by a plainclothes police officer. "I believe Corey Jones went to his grave never knowing that the person who was there was a police officer," Crump said. "The thing that seems reasonable is that he thought he and his car were being vandalized and attacked."

Lawyer: Corey Jones likely died thinking he was being attacked

Thursday morning, Jones' family said they met with Aronberg and later held a press conference on the steps of the Palm Beach County Courthouse. There, Daryl Parks, another attorney for Jones' family, told reporters Aronberg said Raja fired six times at Jones, hitting him three times with one bullet breaking his arm and another bullet entering his side, going through his aorta and lodging somewhere in his upper body.

Raja, who pulled up to Jones in an unmarked white van with tinted windows and did not show Jones his badge, made a statement to police following the shooting but so far, it has not been shared with Jones' family, Parks said. Jones' body was found about 80 to 100 feet away from his vehicle and his gun was found somewhere between the vehicle and his body.

"If he (Raja) did improper things, if he used excessive force, we want him to be held accountable to the full measure of the law because they know Corey did not deserve to be killed on the side of a road by somebody who was supposed to protect and serve him while he waited on a tow truck," Crump said.

Roy Black, a Miami-based trial attorney, has been practicing law for 45 years and has represented more than 100 police officers, many facing potential charges after shootings. Authorities are making a mistake by not releasing more information about the shooting, including a detailed account of Raja's statement, he said. Instead, several key questions remain including whether Jones pointed his gun at Raja and whether the officer identified himself.

Black added that now Raja's story, coupled with forensic findings, will be the evidence used to determine whether the shooting was justified. For it to be justified, investigators will likely have to conclude that Jones knew Raja was an officer and acted aggressively or pointed his gun at Raja.

"The unfortunate part of this event is probably both parties acted lawfully according to Florida law," Black said. "You have a right to be armed. You have a right to discharge your weapon if you are in fear of great bodily harm or death. Probably both of the people out there thought they were in great bodily harm because the other person was armed."

Even with the police description of the shooting, older brother Clinton Jones Jr. says he doesn't know what happened the night his brother was killed. The brothers talked just 20 minutes before the shooting, around 2:50 a.m. Corey Jones told his brother he was stranded and asked for a tow truck number. Clinton Jones Jr. thinks his brother may have felt threatened by Raja.

"I probably would have felt threatened if I was pulled up on the side of road and someone pulled up in front of me in a white van that is unmarked," the 35-year-old former NFL player and restaurant owner said. "To see this happen is very tragic because we know that he (Corey Jones) would not ever, ever, ever, ever, ever pull a gun on a police. Never. This is not like him."

Now, the older brother is mourning the loss of his younger brother who loved fishing, playing the keyboard and who, when they were both youngsters, used to race him to church drum sets to see who could play first. Clinton Jones, Jr. added that he and his brother also weren't raised to see racial differences and that his younger brother had friends and band members of many races.

"No disrespect about black lives matter but all lives matter," the older brother said. "This is not a black thing. My brother didn't see color. I didn't see color."

Corey Jones' father Clinton Jones Sr., a 58-year-old who renovates and sells homes, has been married to his children's stepmother Kattie Jones, 58, who works at a mentoring organization, for 25 years. The

couple is clinging to memories of Corey Jones making faces at them and laughing as they kissed and renewed their wedding vows last month.

"He was caring in such a way that it came easy," Kattie Jones said as her voice cracked with emotion.

Jones' father said his son would run before getting into a fight and that he never saw his son get into a fight with anyone. He describes his son as responsible and giving and told of his passion for drumming.

"Corey became a drummer when he was about 3 years old," Clinton Jones Sr., said. "One time we were looking for him and we went into the kitchen and he was inside the cabinet. I heard something tapping and it was him inside beating on the pots and pans."

Now the father, who is also preparing to bury his mother, has a message for people learning about his son's life: "I just want the truth. Keep the beat alive for Corey. Keep his memory alive because he was a great guy."

Thursday, civil rights leader Rev. Al Sharpton said he planned to travel to Palm Beach County at the request of Jones' family and their attorneys. Protesters using the hashtag #JusticeforCorey also gathered outside the Palm Beach Gardens Police Department on Thursday.

Meanwhile, as she waits for answers, Melissa Jones said she keeps thinking about the last time she saw her brother alive. The siblings and several family members were celebrating their uncle's release from prison and Corey Jones volunteered to buy everyone food from Boston Market. Together, they sat laughing as they ate baked chicken, vegetables, and Jones' favorite food, macaroni and cheese.

"It was a beautiful thing for all of us to be together in harmony and joking," Melissa Jones said. "I really want to know what happened. We really deserve justice."