

Talking Points

A weekly section to spur conversation



PSYCHOLOGIST: SCHOOL SHOOTER SUFFERED FETAL ALCOHOL DAMAGE

| The Associated Press

Attorneys for Florida school shooter Nikolas Cruz began building their argument Monday that his birth mother's alcohol abuse left him with severe behavioral problems that eventually led to his 2018 murder of 17 people at Parkland's Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School.

Paul Connor, a Seattle-area neuropsychologist, said medical records and testimony by prior witnesses show that Brenda Woodard drank and used cocaine throughout much of her pregnancy before Cruz's birth in 1998. Woodard, a Fort Lauderdale prostitute, gave up the baby immediately after to his adoptive parents, Lynda and Roger Cruz. Woodard died last year.

Connor, testifying by Zoom, told jurors that people with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder show at a young age problems with motor skills, impulse control, socializing and paying attention — problems previous defense testimony showed Cruz had.

Cruz's preschool teachers testified he couldn't run without falling or use utensils. He was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder as a young child and teachers testified that he was extremely anxious and had trouble making friends.

At 5, tests showed Cruz had impairments in 10 intellectual categories including memory, reasoning, language and impulsivity, Connor said. Court records and earlier testimony showed he would have frequent outbursts in class and at home. By middle school, he was making threats.

Connor said he measured Cruz's IQ at 83, which he said matches the slightly below average intelligence many people with fetal alcohol issues often score. He said IQ tests conducted throughout Cruz's life found similar results, including one done recently by a prosecution expert.

Under cross-examination by lead prosecutor Mike Satz, Connor conceded he is not board certified in his field but said such certification is voluntary and only a state license is required to practice. He also conceded that he almost always testifies on behalf of the defense in fetal alcohol cases, not prosecutors. He will continue testifying Tuesday.

Cruz, 23, pleaded guilty in October to murdering 14 students and three staff members and wounding 17 others as he stalked a three-story classroom building with an AR-15-style semiautomatic rifle on Valentine's Day 2018. His trial is only to decide whether the former Stoneman Douglas student is sentenced to death or life without parole. For the seven-man, five-woman jury to impose a death sentence, the vote must be unanimous.

Satz finished his primary case last month. He played security videos of the shooting and showed the rifle Cruz used. Teachers and students testified about watching others die. He showed graphic autopsy and crime scene photos and took jurors to the fenced-off building, which remains blood-stained and bullet-pocked. Parents and spouses gave tearful and angry statements about their loss.

In an attempt to counter that, assistant public defender Melisa McNeill and her team have made Cruz's history their case's centerpiece, hoping at least one juror will vote for life.

After the defense concludes its case in the coming weeks, the prosecution will present a rebuttal case before the jury's deliberations begin.

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FAMILY OF COLORADO MAN SHOT BY POLICE WANTS ACCOUNTABILITY

By Jesse Bedayn | The Associated Press

Police who shot a 22-year-old Colorado man after he called 911 for roadside assistance escalated the situation, needlessly leading to his death, the man's relatives said in a tearful news conference Tuesday in which they called for accountability.

After Christian Glass' June 11 death in the small mountain town of Silver Plume west of Denver, the Clear Creek County Sheriff's office issued a news release saying that Glass was shot after he became "argumentative and uncooperative" and tried to stab an officer when police broke a car window to grab him.

"Christian was experiencing a crisis, and he called 911 for help," said the parents' attorney, Siddhartha Rathod, "and yet these officers busted out Christian's window, shot him six times with bean bag rounds, Tased him multiple times from two Tasers, and then shot him five times."

The Colorado Bureau of Investigation handles police shootings, including the Glass case, but the family wants prosecutors to file criminal charges, Rathod said.

Heidi McCollum, district attorney for the Fifth Judicial District that includes Clear Creek County, released a statement Tuesday saying her office is investigating the case along with the Colorado Bureau of Investigation. Her office plans to eventually issue a report on the shooting or present the case to a grand jury, which would decide if indictments should be

issued, McCollum said.

The videos shared with The Associated Press show Glass refusing to come out of his car while also telling police he's "terrified" and making heart shapes with his hands to officers. At one point, he also can be seen praying with folded hands and saying, "Dear Lord, please, don't let them break the window."

When the officers did break the window, Glass seemed to panic and grabbed a knife.

Police then shot Glass with bean bag rounds and shocked him with a stun gun before the young man twisted in his seat and thrust a knife toward an officer, the footage showed. Then one officer fired his gun, hitting Glass. The recordings then show Glass stabbing himself before he died.

The family said the videos were only edited to blur the body. The AP has requested that police provide any videos related to the case.

Rathod said Glass had no history of mental illness. When asked about Glass's abnormal behavior, he said "unfortunately we are not ever going to know."

Rathod released an autopsy report that found that Glass died of gunshot wounds. It said he had THC, a .01% blood alcohol concentration, and amphetamine in his system, the last of which Rathod said is likely from an ADHD prescription for Glass.

The shooting comes amid a national outcry for police reforms focused on crisis interven-

tion, de-escalation and alternative policing programs. In Denver and New York, behavioral health specialists are sent to 911 callers facing crises that police may not be trained to address or could even exacerbate.

Police haven't said if any behavioral health specialists were called for Glass.

Use-of-force and de-escalation experts who reviewed the footage for The Associated Press said this case is an example of when a behavioral health specialist or crisis response team — programs becoming increasingly popular across the country — may have helped de-escalate the situation and avert Glass' death.

"There are some real red flags that suggest potential problems," said Seth Stoughton, a former police officer and leading use-of-force expert who reviewed portions of the footage. Stoughton testified in the trial of Derek Chauvin, the police officer who murdered George Floyd.

While police officers may be justified in using force once a situation has intensified, "it's everything that we do before that in terms of de-escalation that can make those situations go a completely different direction," said Tamara Lynn, the executive council president for the National De-Escalation Training Center, who reviewed the footage.

In particular, both Lynn and Stoughton questioned why officers didn't take Glass up on his offer, recorded by body camera footage,

to disarm himself by throwing his knives out of his car window.

While a thrown knife can pose a threat, "officers have plenty of opportunity to maneuver themselves and put themselves in a position that's not risky," said Stoughton. "I am kind of astonished that they did not take advantage of what looked like a very clear opportunity to have him separate himself from the weapons."

Similarly, Stoughton wondered why they needed to break the car window. He said police don't have all day to spend on one call, but questioned if they needed to.

"It's not clear to me that it should have gone that far," he said.

Between tears on Tuesday, Christian's mother, Sally Glass, displayed a pendant of Jesus recovered from her son's car that is engraved with the words, "Pray for us."

"We have to pray for us in America to make this a less violent country," Sally Glass said. "I think a lot of people now would agree that there is a systemic problem with policing: It's too aggressive. They escalate at every opportunity, and it looks like they are spoiling for a fight. ... They should be protecting us, not attacking us."

Glass said her son was "petrified" and "paralyzed" by fear the night he was killed.

"I have a hole in my heart, and it will be there until the day I die," Glass said.

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