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Seeking Justice for Alonzo Smith

A campaign reaches from the DC Council to the UN

by Virginia Avniel Spatz

“This is a healing model for us as a community,” said April Goggans, looking out on a candlelit circle of community members outside Marbury Plaza on Nov. 1. The vigil marked the one-year anniversary of the death of Alonzo (Zo) Fiero Smith, age 27, following an encounter with special police officers (SPOs) at the apartment complex, 2300 Good Hope Road SE.

The vigil brought together Zo’s family, friends, and neighbors as well as members of supporting organizations: Coalition of Concerned Mothers, Prince George’s People’s Coalition, Black Lives Matter DC, API Resistance, Stop Police Terror Project DC, SURJ (Showing Up for Racial Justice), and The Timothy Dawkins-El Project. The Wendt Center for Loss and Healing also provided assistance for the event, organized by Pan-African Community Action (PACA).

Goggans, an organizer with Black Lives Matter and Stop Police Terror (sptdc.com), has lived in Ward 8 for many years, several of them in Marbury Plaza. Goggans has been a stalwart in the growing group of individuals and organizations working to support Smith, to seek justice for Zo, and to bring about related changes to policing and public safety, particularly in communities of color.

#JUSTICE4ZO AT ONE YEAR

Recent judicial news in Alonzo’s case is “disappointing but not discouraging,” according to his mother, Beverly Smith. Smith finally learned, in an Oct. 13 meeting with Assistant

US Attorney Jean Sexton, that no charges are to be filed against the SPOs involved in Zo’s death. A statement from US Attorney Channing D. Phillips described investigative steps leading to a finding of “insufficient evidence to pursue federal criminal civil rights or local charges.” Phillips’ statement concluded with a note that “proving ‘willfulness’ is a heavy burden.” Prosecutors must prove, “beyond a reasonable doubt, that the officer acted with the deliberate and specific intent to do something the law forbids.”

Smith still hopes for new evidence allowing the case to be reopened. She is also pursuing litigation in which other charges can be brought without proof of criminal intent.

PACA (pacadm.org) organizer Netfa Freeman says the US Attorney’s statement provides “a version” of what happened and does not entirely satisfy the call for “full disclosure,” one of the five demands of PACA’s Justice4Zo campaign. Another unsatisfied demand is release of the names of Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) and SPO officers involved in the case.

Just prior to the vigil, the campaign saw important progress on its demand for an independent international investigation. The UN General Assembly formally received the “Report of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent.” The report mentions the Alonzo Smith case, expressing concern about “alarming levels of police brutality and excessive use of lethal force by law-enforcement officials, committed with impunity against people of African descent in the United States.” Freeman called the report “validation of what we’re seeing and our call for community control of police.”

Demand for community control over police has evolved into a separate PACA campaign, including monthly educational meetings in Ward 8. The #Justice4Zo campaign continues to demand transparency in laws and policies around private/special police.

In June the mayor’s office proposed new rulemaking on special police officers and security officers. At press time the regulations had not yet been filed with the DC Council, although revised proposals were published in the Oct. 14 DC Register. Revisions clarify train-

ing issues but do not address transparency or accountability.

COMMUNITY BACKBONE

A call for transparency and accountability – for special police and for the MPD – was heard repeatedly at the Judiciary Committee’s Nov. 3 roundtable on policing. Smith, Freeman, and Goggans testified along with others from organizations cosponsoring the November vigil. Such advocacy is essential in honoring Zo’s memory, Smith says. Her circle of co-advocates continues to grow. Rev. Steven Douglass, friend of Terrence Sterling and organizer for justice in his case, offered prayers at the anniversary vigil. Also bringing support was SURJ organizer Brendan Orsinger. But it’s the Coalition of Concerned Mothers, encompassing women facing similar tragedies and embarking on similar campaigns for justice and change, that Smith calls her backbone.

“We are members of a sorority no one seeks to join,” say co-founders Marion Gray-Hopkins and Cynthia DeShola Dawkins. Gray-Hopkins’ son Gary was killed by Prince George’s police in 1999; Dawkins’ son Timothy was killed in DC community violence in 2014. Their sorority includes Darlene Cain, mother of Dale Graham, killed by Baltimore City police, 2012; Bernie McFadden, mother of three sons lost to community violence; Gina Best, mother of India Kager, killed by Virginia Beach police in 2015; and Rhanda Dormeus, mother of Koryn Gaines, killed by Baltimore County police this year. Testimony from each mother anchored the Nov. 1 vigil.

Smith also advocates on Capitol Hill with Every Case Matters. As part of this group she calls for attention to “non-high-profile” cases of police brutality, and organizes for local and national responses.

Once introduced to the DC Council, proposed rulemaking on special police officers and security officers will take the form of an approval resolution, enacted automatically after 45 business days, unless the council acts. Citizens seeking input should contact their councilmembers.

Virginia Avniel Spatz is a regular contributor to East of the River and can be found online at vspatz.wordpress.com. ER

Members of the Coalition of Concerned Mothers – (L-R:) Bernie McFadden, Darlene Cain, Cynthia DeShola Dawkins (speaking), Marion Gray-Hopkins, and Rhanda Dormeus (not pictured: Gina Best) – at the Nov. 1 #Justice4Zo vigil.

