

OPINION

Highs, Lows 10 Years after Police Shooting

What has changed since the death of Jose Mejia Poot?

BY MARTIN GONZALEZ AND DAN HANDELMAN

Last Friday, April 1 marked 10 years to the day since day laborer Jose Santos Victor Mejia Poot was shot and killed by Portland Police officers responding to a 9-1-1 call inside a mental hospital. Such an anniversary seems a good time to examine where we were as a city then and what has changed.

Mr. Mejia did not have a mental illness, but rather was suffering a seizure from epilepsy when he found himself 20 cents shy of bus fare two days earlier.

Officers called to the bus dragged Mr. Mejia out and reportedly beat him. Once released from jail, Mr.

Mejia, a Native American from the Yucatan peninsula who did not speak English nor much Spanish, confused and penniless, was misdiagnosed as having a mental illness and brought to Gateway center on March 30, 2001.

Two days later, a staff nurse called the police after Mr. Mejia got out of his room and allegedly threatened staff with a pencil. Officers responded, including the Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) trained officer who knew how to de-escalate a situation.

Mr. Mejia was returned to his room without incident. A few hours later, he got out again, the nurse called again, but the CIT officer was no longer on duty. The officers who responded confronted Mr. Mejia, who allegedly grabbed the aluminum push rod from a door, and they shot and killed him.

To its credit, the City put together a series of forums to hear from the community about what they

would want to see changed. The community had put forward a list of 10 demands for the City, the police and for Tri-Met.

However, a few steps taken drove the wedge between community and police further: Chief Mark Kroeker awarded two of the officers involved in the shooting with medals; then, community members seeking to appeal the finding of "no misconduct" for the beating on the bus were prevented from using the City's Citizen Review Committee by administrative declaration of the Independent Police Review Division director, the City Auditor, and the City Attorney.

Since then, the hospital settled with the family and closed its doors; the city settled with the family for a small amount of money and an agreement to conduct at least one hour of CIT training and training about epilepsy for all officers, and the agreement to buy less lethal weapons as an alternative to firearms.

So what has changed at the Portland Police Bureau?

One of the community demands that grew out of the incident was to get CIT training for all officers. That happened, but not until after the death of James Chasse Jr in 2006.

Among the ten specific demands from the community forums after Mr. Mejia's death was the creation of a citizens police review board and changes to deadly force policies.

The IPR was created in 2001 and strengthened some in 2010; however, it still falls short of community expectations for a strong oversight body.

In 2008, Chief Sizer changed the use of force policy to encourage officers to use the least force necessary; that new rule is clearly up to interpretation as officers have been involved in 9 shootings since January 2010.

It is certainly a healthy change, however, that there have been no

awards given out for controversial shootings in recent years, and that current Chief Mike Reese called the number of shootings "unacceptable" and pledged to find ways to avoid future incidents.

Another demand was for diversity training, which has been offered to officers with mixed success and little input from the community.

Looking at other demands from 2001, the community wanted strict standards for officers dealing with individuals with disabilities, hiring officers to reflect the size of Portland's Latino population, and for the City to pass an ordinance against police brutality.

On these points, we are still waiting.

Martin Gonzalez was the coordinator of the Justice for Jose Mejia Poot Committee and currently sits on the Portland School Board. Dan Handelman also participated in the justice committee and is a member of Portland Copwatch.

Investigate Standardized Testing in Schools

Fake improvement doesn't help our students

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

For several years, ever since the No Child Left Behind Act took effect, students, teachers and school districts have felt the pressure that comes from living in a nation that uses standardized tests as its sole method for measuring student proficiency.

When too many students at one school perform poorly on these tests, teachers can be fired, principals replaced and schools closed. Hundreds of teachers fired in Washington, D.C. schools because of poor performance by students on test. The stakes are high. But no one would have guessed that the pressure would lead to alleged cheating on these exams.

An investigation by USA Today shows into drastic test score turnarounds at Noyes elementary, a Washington, D.C. public school, revealed that seventh grader students

in one classroom at the school each had, on average, nearly 13 wrong answers that were erased and changed to the correct answer.

Coincidence? Maybe not.

In 2006, 10 percent of the school's students "passed" the standardized math test. In 2008, nearly 60 percent did. Tests scores showed the school made similar gains on the reading portion of the test.

Perhaps the teachers simply worked harder and ensured students absorbed the lessons? Maybe. But it's important, for comparison, to note that the average wrong to right erasure for seventh graders throughout the D.C. public school system was less than one.

Noyes Elementary School isn't the only one with questionable score improvement. Fifty-eight Atlanta schools are under investigation because high rates of wrong answers changed to right on student answer sheets raised flags. Similar occurrences have raised red flags in Detroit as well.

If this is, in fact, cheating, who is responsible? Teachers? School principals?

No one is sure but one thing is certain: if it's happening in D.C., Detroit and Atlanta, it is happening in other cities.

Changing test answers to fake improvement doesn't help our students. It hurts them. That is why a federal task force needs to be formed to investigate drastic improvement on standardized test at our nation's public schools.

We want to believe that our teachers and principals are honest but we also know that fear - of being fired if students perform poorly - or greed - teachers and principals at Noyes received bonuses when scores improved - are powerful motivators.

There also needs to be another way to measure student performance. We cannot simply rely on standardized tests. Periodic monitoring can easily show how students and teachers perform in the classroom. Required essays and math 'projects' will show us that students can actually apply what they are taught.

Greg Mathis is a retired Michigan District Court judge and current syndicated television show judge.



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