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Race Riot by Alexis Johnson

On an average October day in Champaign- Urbana, Illinois, Mary Hays, a 48-year-old white English professor at the University of Illinois met her carpool partner at a campus 3car garage. Both women live in a small, mostly white town, 20 minutes outside of the university town. Hays was startled to find her friend having a distressed conversation on her cell phone. After a few seconds the friend hung up the phone, as Hays recalls it, and turned to Hays to clue her in on the dramatic situation. "I'm trying to get a hold of my friend and she's on her way to town and I want to warn her". With worries of what might require a warning, Mary quickly asked, "what?" The woman then recounted what her husband had just heard on the radio, "They had that judgment about that kid that was shot, and the blacks are rioting." Hays' friend was referring to the Champaign Police Department's judgment on one of the most controversial shootings that Champaign-Urbana had seen in years.

A few days before, on Friday, October 9, 2009 officers from the Champaign Police Department responded to a call at 906 West Vine Street. An area only blocks away from Bradley McKinley, the largest housing complex in the city. At 1:20 p.m. a neighbor called in with reports of two black teenaged boys breaking into a nearby home. Though Kiwane Carrington had been given permission to sleep in the house by the brother of the homeowner, and had been welcomed into the home numerous times by the homeowner herself, both the neighbor and the police force were unaware of this as the events of October 9 escalated. The neighbor could neither see nor recognize the two boys faces and assumed that they were unwelcome intruders. As reported by the police, Champaign's Chief of Police R.T. Finney was the first to arrive on the scene and was eventually aided by an Officer Daniel Norbits. The two white officers approached the subjects with intent to arrest, but the teenagers resisted. In the a short scuffle between those involved, Kiwane Carrington, was shot by Norbits as his friend tried to push past the police when told to "get down." The only recorded explanation for the shot fired exists in the police report of the incident and reads: "Officer Norbits was having trouble remembering the exact moment the weapon was discharged and why it was discharged." Kiwane Carrington, age 15, died later the same day in a Champaign hospital. His friend, whose name has not been released, was arrested on breaking and entering charges. A few weeks later the second teen was released when the homeowner confirmed his welcome status in her home and was rearrested on the charges of resisting arrest. The Champaign-Urbana community responded immediately with a number of black leaders in the community demanding answers and information from the police. Dozens of letters to the editor appeared in Champaign's paper, The News-Gazette, with request varying from the resignation of the police chief to the investigation of training for the entire Champaign police force.

The intensity of reactions of the Champaign-Urbana residents varied, but a general consensus was clear: the police department needed to provide more information and provide it quickly. Carrington's family members, residents of Vine Street, and any other people that knew Carrington were bombarded with questions by the media and police investigators. Donna Shonk, the dean of READY, the alternative school that Carrington attended, was responsible for answering many of these questions for Carrington's schoolmates. "The hardest question to answer for the students was 'Why?' I heard that question from every student who was trying to understand this. We did not experience any racial issues or tension during the funeral week. On Tuesday, after the official report came out, the students began to make statements that this was racial." A little over a month later, right before Thanksgiving, the same house in front of which Kiwane Carrington and his friend struggled with the police appears vacant and

completely calm in the cloudy daylight. The riots reported to Professor Mary Hays never took place. Instead several vigils were held in Carrington's honor. A few feet from the curb, leaning on a large oak tree, is a collection of candles, flowers and teddy bears that continue to accumulate. A similar pile sprawls across the front steps of the small house. This memorial is just two blocks away from where a well-seasoned officer at the Champaign Police Department, Chris Young, lives with his fiancé and five children. Their neighbor borders one of the most impoverished areas of the Champaign-Urbana community. The neighborhood has a large minority population as well as a reputation for being crime ridden and feared by wealthy families from the south end of town.

Officer Christopher Young, a biracial cop who is the sixth police officer of color on Champaign's police force, pulls his hat down as he steps out of his police car to assist three other officers with a reported robbery. Young is around 5'10, but seems to have a taller presence because each move he makes seems to have a purpose. It's the night before Thanksgiving but Young seems completely at home as he walks up to a tall black 17-year-old being questioned as another officer removes his handcuffs. The young teenager's tone is one of stifled frustration as he complains that he was injured by the handcuffs "Why did you have to do my wrists like that?" The police officer replies with a standard answer that the teen was "moving this way and that, and wouldn't stand still." When compared to the reports of the death of Kiwane Carrington that took place a few weeks earlier, the scene shares many similarities: a frustrated minority teen, several white officers, an incident that one side claims has not been committed and the other insists has taken place. The outcome, however, does not include death. As it becomes clear to the police that the teen has not stolen anything, they un-cuff him and apologize as he rubs his wrists. A short, brunette police officer averts his eyes away from the face of the teen and with a large breath of cold air asks, "Are you okay?" The teen nods and simply walks away into the night. There are no shots fired, no racially charged comments expelled, no city council meetings, or civil law suits filed for the standard. So what happened differently on this standard call that it was not more like the controversial shooting on October 9?

Officer Young struggles to answer this question just as much as the public does. He describes himself in two parts, Chris Young the Cop and Chris Young the Citizen. His eyes focus outside of the warm squad car, finding something on the dark street as he explains his answer, "I wasn't involved so I can step back and say okay I can see how this situation might have evolved and that could have been me, and I can step back and see how a young man got shot that wasn't armed. There are questions in my mind too. I don't know." As a veteran Champaign officer of 14 years, two months and 25 days, Young has witnessed a number of controversial police skirmishes and has also been apart of a civil lawsuit brought against Champaign police. This number, he assures me, is much smaller than many other cities. Young also believes that the infrequency of officers shooting civilians and might add to the voracity with which the public reacts to the uses of police firearms in Champaign county. He refers to these instances as flash points, a large issue with the police that the public takes advantage of to express all of their complaints about the police. Though he says he sympathizes with the public and understands their frustration with the police, Young also has a good idea of the process the officers involved in the Kiwane Carrington shooting are going through. In 2000, Officer Young was involved with a civil suit following the death of a mentally ill patron that died of a heart attack after attempting to strangle a police officer. Young was at the scene of the incident and though he was not physically involved, bore witness to what happened between the police and the suspect. The public responded very negatively to that situation with accusations of police brutality. The police department's inability to release their nuggets of privileged information offers little resolution to the current public unrest in Champaign: "You cannot release all of the little ducklings out into the pond, even though some of those little duckling might help you look good. It is just information that can't come out yet. I think the public has a really hard time with that."

The lack of information provided by the police department about the shooting has been a serious community concern. In addition to a general confusion about what exactly happened at 906 West Vine, Carrington's family was not even allowed to view the body for identification. The largest problem the community expressed, however, is one that suggests racial bias in the Carrington shooting. When asked if she has witnessed any racial tension in Champaign-Urbana, Patricia Avery, the current Chair on The Champaign County Board said, "Sometimes I feel as though I'm trapped in a time warp." Avery says she can recall experiencing racially motivated verbal attacks as late as 2000, when she was elected to her position as Chair of the Champaign County Board. "I was told by the good old boys that if I, a black woman, became the Chair of the Board that there would be too many blacks in charge, even though at that time there was only four African Americans, including myself serving on the board" Though race relations in Champaign seem to have come a long way from the race riots that Avery witnessed in her high school days, she feels that relations still have a long way to go. "It's going to be hard to improve race relations when there is never seems to be any justice. Kiwane's death has caused the black community to say, 'Enough is enough'."

Since the shooting Avery have been a representative for the black community at numerous press conferences in which she calls for an outside FBI investigation of the shooting and an explicit explanation of what happened on October 9th. Though the NAACP of Champaign-Urbana, and numerous rallies in Carrington's honor have expressed Avery's same experience of a nearly-tangible racial tension in the Champaign-Urbana area, Officer Young

says he sees none of that tension while on the job. "Have I worked in a racially charged environment here no, I was not a cop though here in the 70's and 60's." Young keeps his eyes on the road as he talks. He cruises around the city effortlessly. "My father was, though, and he says that things were very bad back then. There were regular race riots. There are some hate and discontent feelings out there. I don't think it's like that, but I think that there are people out there with long memories."

Officer Young just may be on to something with Champaign Citizens having lengthy memories. More than six weeks after Carrington's death, Mary Hays tells her friends what is, in her mind, a ridiculous story of a small town woman's fears of the blacks rioting. Gun control rallies inspired by the firing of a police weapon on a minor are planned for the Thanksgiving weekend. The local high schools are still considering a soft lockdown option that would include limited access to the entry points of the school buildings and heightened hallway monitoring during the trial that will take extra precautions against a student uprising. Soon following, the holiday the Champaign County state's attorney is expected to reveal her ruling on the previous judgment of the Champaign County Police Department on the actions of Chief R.T. Finney. An FBI investigation is expected to follow close after the start of the New Year. Officer Daniel Norbits is on paid leave from his position at the Champaign County Police Force. Officer Young assures me that there has also been a lasting effect on the officers that are still on duty. "The fear that I have that I try to overcome is running through a matrix of stuff before I make a decision . . . am I going to lose my house if I get sued, and I'm going to lose my family. I've just got to block that all out.

When asked how he reconciles the continuing disdain of the public with his daily contribution to protecting those same people that criticize the police force, Officer Young's face takes on a serious composure and he does not hesitate with his answer. I think people get so upset, you're grieving and you don't know what to do so you blame the police. I'm not doing this job to be appreciated. I'm not thriving off of public praise. The female victim at the hospital that I can make comforted for two minutes out of this whole ordeal after she's been sexually assaulted, the thank you from that. Helping the kids in a house full of roaches that has no food. I don't care what people think about us. I know what we do and we do a damn good job."