

NORTH METRO

Brooklyn Center man shot by police was 6 days to diploma

Friends and teachers were stunned by the death of a 20-year-old killed while carrying a rifle on a street.

By Abby Simons (<https://www.startribune.com/abby-simons/6370413/>) Star Tribune |

JUNE 4, 2012 — 3:02PM

Those who knew Dontaylo Wright describe him consistently: a lanky, affable class clown who rapped about the 18th Amendment for a social studies assignment and literally leapt for joy when he learned two weeks ago that he had secured enough credits to graduate from Brooklyn Center Academy.

He was the same man who witnesses say wore a vacant expression and strode along a quiet residential street Thursday evening, armed with a rifle he didn't drop when told to by an officer. The officer ultimately shot and killed him.

Grieving friends and family gathered Friday near the intersection of 53rd and Emerson avenues and the shady sidewalk where Wright died. The spot provided a makeshift memorial but few clues into what might have prompted a 20-year-old six days from getting his diploma to retrieve a gun from a nearby apartment, or where he might have been headed with it before he was killed.

"It's not really real to me yet. It's real but it's not," said Reanna Ficken, a friend of Wright's since sixth grade, who said she didn't realize what had happened until Friday morning.

Thursday evening, Wright had stopped by the house she and several others shared a few blocks from the scene, and where he had lived until recently. He was angry, Ficken said, but she didn't know why. "I asked him what was wrong, he wouldn't say anything," she said. "He just kept looking around and down; he was sad or mad."

Authorities have released few details about the incident, now being investigated by the Hennepin County Sheriff's Office.

According to Brooklyn Center Police Chief Kevin Benner, officers responded to a report of a man wielding a rifle with a scope at 53rd and Emerson just after 8:30 p.m. The first officer on the scene confronted the man and "was forced to shoot the suspect, who died at the scene," Benner said in a news release.

Officials have not yet released the officer's name. A grand jury will determine whether the shooting was justified, which is standard procedure.

According to court records, Wright had a couple of misdemeanors on his record, for theft and underage drinking, but no violent offenses.

An amateur rapper and dancer, he had signed up to attend the Institute of Production & Recording in Minneapolis after his graduation, scheduled for Thursday, friends said.

School officials say his younger sister Octavia, 18, who is set to graduate the same day, will accept his diploma in his honor.

'He's got a rifle'

Rumors swirled Thursday among a crowd that gathered after the shooting that the victim might have been a young teenager carrying a bat. But witnesses who called 911 Thursday evening struck down the rumor.

"There were three of us that said 'Oh my God, he's got a rifle,'" said Kathy Klingensmith, who was sitting in a garage with a few friends, feet from where the shooting would occur, when they saw Wright walk past them into a six-unit apartment complex, then



DAVID JOLLES - STAR TRIBUNE

At the shooting scene in Brooklyn Center Friday, two young men poured beer from a 40-ounce bottle over a faded bloodstain, then

leave with the gun. "We wouldn't call the police if he were carrying a baseball bat."

He was agitated and muttering to himself as he passed and made no eye contact, she said. Police arrived from each side and told the group to get inside.

Kathy Klingensmith's nephew Jacob Klingensmith said he was home when he heard screams, later determined to come from the first officer on the scene, commanding Wright to drop the gun. Klingensmith said he looked out a window to see Wright standing on the sidewalk, facing an officer. The officer told him repeatedly to drop the gun, Klingensmith said.

"He just kind of ignored him. He was standing there and just kind of swaying back and forth."

Klingensmith said the man held the gun in one hand and wasn't aiming it, but running the barrel across his other hand. He began to raise the gun when the officer fired several shots, possibly three, into his chest, Klingensmith said. The man slumped forward, then fell backward, landed on his side and rolled onto his back. The officer ordered him away from the weapon, but he was quickly unresponsive. It all lasted less than a minute.

Cameo Sahara, who lives nearby, said police waited about 20 minutes to approach Wright after a K-9 dragged his body a few feet away from the gun. The scene was cleared after about two hours.

Friday morning, the area was marked by a few bouquets of flowers, an empty vodka bottle and a cigarette in the spot where Wright was shot.

Six days from graduating

At Brooklyn Center Academy, an alternative school less than a mile away, two large pieces of poster board bore the words "Chicken Wang" -- Wright's nickname -- with a photo of him flashing a broad smile as he donated blood. Classmates' signatures shared memories and bid their friend goodbye. Inside the office, Director Kathy Mortensen and Dean of Students Lamii Zarlee sat in stunned silence. Mortensen dabbed her eyes.

Wright had attended the school since ninth grade, and despite a few slip-ups, was determined to graduate. At the end of his last day at school two weeks ago, Zarlee said he figured out that Wright had made it. He chased down a school bus, stepped inside and found Wright in the back. "He said 'Mr. Zarlee, I didn't do nothin', did I?' and I said 'Yeah, you did. You just completed your high school requirements. You're done. You're graduating.'"

"The whole bus erupted," Mortensen said. "Everyone was yelling and clapping for the kid."

Business teacher Karl Carlson said Wright always liked to make teachers and classmates smile. He had an occasional temper, Carlson said, but it never lasted long. "There wasn't a mean bone in his body," he said.

It was a sentiment expressed by his friend, Sam Sjolvold, who called Wright a confidant. "He always told me, why you stressin' out? Life's too short. You just need to be like me; I'm happy all the time," she said. "He was right. He never stayed angry long."

Abby Simons • 612-673-4921

Abby Simons is the Star Tribune's Public Safety Editor. Her team covers crime and courts across the metro. She joined the Star Tribune in 2008 and previously reported on crime, courts and politics.

✉ abby.simons@startribune.com 📞 651-925-5043 🐦 [ajillsimons](https://twitter.com/ajillsimons)