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# Trust shaken after inquest



Kathleen Griffin

Like all prolonged legal proceedings, the inquest into the death of Markham teen Paraz Suleman often seemed like theatre, a dramatic tragedy, sharp with an adversarial bite, with a cold dose of reality thrown in for good measure.

It's difficult to say how the inquest may have unfolded if numerous civil suits filed by both sides didn't exist.

Those lawsuits threw their pall over every comment to the jury; they coloured every question to witnesses; they produced legal arguments that had less to do with the issue at hand and more to do with making sure something was on record — a record you can be sure will be referred to endlessly in civil court.

It seemed a bit of a sham, a play for some future, unseen audience, where the personalities of the two major players took centre stage.

When the verdict of accident came down late Friday, Suleman's mother, Shaheen Kamadia, reacted with a shake of her head and a bitter smile. She wasn't really surprised, she said. York Region is very pro-police, she said. She was glad to

finally hear from those involved, for the first time, what happened that night.

She said she didn't think the jury had the courage to say Wiche lied. And she may be right.

There's no doubt Wiche has suffered as a result of his split-second decision that night in June 1996. He faced criminal charges and even though they were later dismissed, that can't be easy for any cop. He was attacked from behind and stabbed five times at the Newmarket Courthouse, injuries from which he's still recovering, both physically and psychologically. He had to testify at the inquest and he'll be in and out of civil court for years to come.

But Wiche took the inquest stand and changed his story. He was defensive, arrogant, aggressive and seething with anger. Instead of saying he fired his gun because he was in fear for his life, he told the jury he doesn't remember pulling the trigger.

He never explained why his notes, made days after the shooting, tell a very different tale. Those notes were read back to him numerous times and clearly detail how he kept both hands on the gun and fired at the driver's window after being struck. On the stand, he agreed that must have happened, but now he can't recall firing the gun. I didn't believe him. The jury did.

Kamadia, on the other hand, rubbed people the wrong way from the start. That's abundantly clear even from letters to the editor of this paper. Her aggressive, in-your-face style was a bit offensive, people thought. Her charges of conspiracy and corruption in the system were over the top. Calling Wiche and the entire York Regional Police force racist drew the ire of the public; she was blaming others instead of her son or herself.

The fact she works as a negotiator for one of Canada's largest unions meant she could mobilize supporters quickly, including controversial Toronto activists such as Dudley Laws and his Black Action Defence Committee, and the protests and bus loads of bodies were all a bit much.

It just wasn't the typical image of a grieving mother we've come to expect.

Coroner Dr. William Lucas ruled racism was not an issue for the inquest jury, and he was right; had the driver of the stolen Jeep pulled over when instructed, it wouldn't have mattered what colour he was.

But besides one Asian juror, the coroner, the lawyers (six of them), the jury, the police, 20 of 23 witnesses and even the vast majority of media were all white.

It's not difficult to see how Kamadia and others in her situation may feel the odds are stacked against them.

The entire six-week proceeding was characterized by showboating, sarcastic police lawyers, personal attacks on Kamadia, endless criticism of the media and the same message hammered home again and again — we must trust police to use their best judgment on the mean streets.

Yes, we must trust them. But what if their best judgment isn't good enough? After the last six weeks, I'm left not only with a bitter taste in my mouth, but with that trust more than a little shaken.

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