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Sergeant at eye of storm says he won't apologize



"I am not a racist," said police Sergeant James Crowley

Globe Staff / July 23, 2009

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This story was reported by Jonathan Saltzman, John R. Ellement, and Erica Noonan of the Globe Staff. It was written by Saltzman.

When Sergeant James M. Crowley climbed the front steps of Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s house last week and unexpectedly placed himself in international headlines, it was not the first time he had a memorable encounter in the line of duty with a prominent black man. Nearly 16 years ago, as a Brandeis University police officer, Crowley desperately tried to save the life of Reggie Lewis after the Boston Celtics star collapsed while practicing in the school gym.

"It bothers him terribly that he couldn't save him," Crowley's 74-year-old mother, Verina Crowley, said yesterday, speaking of her son and the famous basketball player.

Yesterday, as President Obama condemned the Cambridge Police Department during a prime-time White House news conference and Crowley steadfastly refused to issue the apology that Gates has sought, a fuller picture began to emerge of the 42-year-old sergeant who arrested the Harvard scholar last week on a charge of disorderly conduct on the porch of Gates's Cambridge house.

Crowley was a certified emergency medical technician when he performed cardiopulmonary resuscitation on Lewis, to no avail, after the player's heart stopped on July 27, 1993. In a Globe interview later that day, Crowley said he rushed to the university's Shapiro Gymnasium, confirmed that Lewis had no

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pulse, and frantically tried to revive him.

“I just kept on going,” he said. “I just kept thinking, ‘Don’t let him die - just don’t die.’”

Now, 16 years later, he stands accused of racism by Gates, one of the foremost scholars on race in America. Gates had just arrived home to his Cambridge house from a trip abroad to find his front door stuck shut. As he and the driver who brought him from the airport tried to push it open, a passerby called police with a report of a possible break-in. Crowley arrived and demanded that Gates, now inside, show him identification. Crowley’s police report said Gates behaved belligerently when he questioned him, which Gates denied. Authorities dropped the charge Tuesday after it ignited accusations of racism.

But people who know Crowley were skeptical or outright dismissive of allegations of racism. A prominent defense lawyer, a neighbor of Crowley’s, his union, and fellow officers described him yesterday as a respected, and respectful, officer who performs his job well and has led his colleagues in diversity training.

“He’s evenhanded and, in the cases I’ve had with him, he’s been very much in control and very professional,” said Joseph W. Monahan III, a criminal defense lawyer in Cambridge and former Middlesex County prosecutor. Monahan has represented several defendants arrested by Crowley for domestic assaults and for drunken driving.

Crowley himself, speaking to the Globe yesterday and again last night in Natick, said he will not apologize and asserted, “I am not a racist.”

Crowley’s police union issued a statement saying it had reviewed the arrest of Gates and expressed “full and unqualified support” for his actions.

“Sergeant Crowley is a highly respected veteran supervisor with a distinguished record in the Cambridge Police Department,” said the Cambridge Police Superior Officers Association. “His actions at the scene of this matter were consistent with his training, with the informed policies and practices of the Department, and with applicable legal standards.”

The city’s Police Review and Advisory Board, which is independent of the Police Department, has set a meeting July 29 to decide whether to launch a formal inquiry into the incident, according to board investigator Joseph Johnson. He said Gates had not filed a complaint with the board and that no one has filed a complaint against Crowley in the last 12 months.

Crowley, during one of the interviews outside his South Natick home, said he was not authorized to discuss the controversy.

“As much as I’d like to respond, I really can’t,” said the married father of three, who coaches youth basketball and plays on a local softball team.

His neighbor Ed Shagory, a retired lawyer, was less reticent. He said he has been friends with Crowley for more than 17 years, and “I think the world of him and his family.”

Shagory said he was upset by the criticism leveled against the officer and questioned Gates’s statement that the confrontation had inspired the Harvard professor to consider making a documentary about racial profiling.

“I think the idea of him already planning a documentary is very premature, and

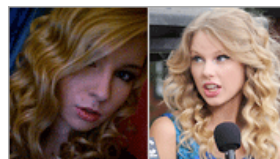
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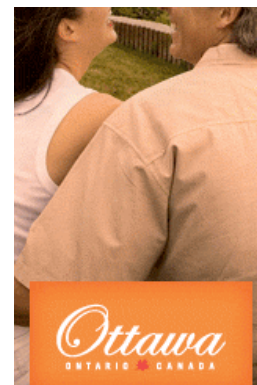
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a very unnecessary thing to say before all the facts are even in,” Shagory said.

Crowley joined Cambridge police around 1998, according to Sergeant James DeFrancesco, an aide to police Commissioner Robert C. Haas, who was unavailable for comment.

Verina Crowley said James is the third of her four sons, all in law enforcement. Two brothers, Jack and Joseph, also work for the Cambridge police. The fourth, Daniel, is a Middlesex County deputy sheriff.

Verina Crowley said her sons were raised mostly in the Fresh Pond neighborhood where she still lives, attended racially diverse Cambridge public schools, and graduated from Cambridge Rindge and Latin High School, where she worked for 26 years.

“He is not a racist,” she said in the hallway of her home. And Gates “is not the first black person he ever met in his life.”

Her children, she said, had black friends over to their home while growing up. James Crowley is still friends with one of those youngsters, now a Cambridge firefighter, she said.

“They grew up with black kids, white kids, kids who didn't have parents, kids who had two parents - everything you can think of,” she recalled. Tolerance “wasn't something you taught,” she said. “You just lived it.”

Her son, she said, remains haunted by the events of that summer day, nearly 16 years ago, when as a Brandeis police officer he was dispatched to the college gym to help an unconscious man - who turned out to be Lewis.

After confirming that the Celtics guard had no pulse, Crowley and another officer began performing CPR, according to an account in the Globe.

“My immediate indication was that I thought he was dead,” Crowley said at the time. An ambulance arrived and took Lewis to Waltham-Weston Hospital, but he could not be revived.

Yesterday, more than a dozen Cambridge police officers working at Harvard and Central squares declined to comment for attribution about the controversy.

But several officers, all of them white, described Crowley as a well-liked officer, and one dismissed the allegations of racism.

That officer, who insisted on anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to reporters, said, “Racism is not part of it, and that is what is frustrating. The fact that the Police Department dropped the charges makes the police officer look like he is wrong.” ■

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