

COLORADO: Cops electrocute pastor to death

Written by Kirk Mitchell, the Denver Post
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Busted for paraphernalia, pastor dies after being shocked repeatedly. Inmates say they witnessed man's death when jailers restrained, shocked him repeatedly



Marvin Booker just wanted to get his shoes.

But deputies at the new Denver jail told him to stop. When Booker, who was being processed on a charge of possession of drug paraphernalia, didn't obey, he was held down, hit with electric shocks and then placed facedown in a holding cell, according to two inmates who watched it unfold.

Booker never got up. He was pronounced dead later that morning.

"I've never seen anything happen like that before in my life," said John Yedo, 54, who was being processed on a charge of destruction of property and said he witnessed the scene. "What I saw is not what you'd expect to see in America."

The two jail witnesses, who were both arrested in the early-morning hours of July 9 around the time Booker was being processed, were contacted and interviewed by The Denver Post separately. Both of them said they had not been questioned by police investigating the death of Booker, a homeless ordained minister who served the poor, but also a habitual criminal with a long string of arrests.

Capt. Frank Gale, spokesman for the jail, said he cannot comment on the ongoing investigation by the Denver Police Department and the Denver district attorney's office, and cannot confirm the inmates' accounts.

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He said what happened at the Van Cise-Simonet Detention Facility would have been recorded on videotape.

"If in fact what they are saying is true, it should be reflected in the video," Gale said.

District attorney spokeswoman Lynn Kimbrough said she couldn't comment during the investigation, which could take several more weeks. The coroner's office is awaiting test results before completing the autopsy report and determining how Booker died, she said. In the meantime, the deputies involved in Booker's case are still on the job.

Yedo has had one prior arrest, in 1974 on a drug charge. Christopher Maten, 25, the other witness, was arrested in 2005 for public consumption of alcohol. Neither is a career criminal. The versions the two suspects tell are nearly identical.

"I can't breathe . . ."

Both say that Booker, 56, was asleep in a chair in a holding area of the jail when his name was called and he was ordered to a processing desk.

Half-asleep about 3 a.m., Booker walked to the desk in his socks, forgetting to put on his shoes. The female deputy ordered Booker to sit in a chair in front of the desk.

Booker responded that he wished to stand. When the deputy threatened to have him placed in a holding cell if he didn't sit, Booker told her he would go to the holding cell, said Maten, who had been arrested that morning for resisting arrest in a confrontation with a parking-meter attendant.

" 'Let me get my shoes,' " Maten quoted Booker as saying as he walked toward the chairs to get his shoes.

The deputy yelled at him repeatedly to stop, got up and followed Booker. Booker turned and repeated that he was getting his shoes, Maten said.

The deputy grabbed Booker by the arm and put a lock on him, Yedo said. Booker, who was 5 feet 5 and weighed 175 pounds, pushed her away. At that point, four other deputies wrestled Booker to the concrete floor. They slid down two steps to the floor in the sitting area. Yedo said the deputies each grabbed a limb while he struggled.

" 'Get the Taser. Get the Taser,' " Yedo quoted one of the deputies as saying.

Yedo said he was only about 3 feet away, and Maten said he was close enough that if he stood and took one step, he could reach out and touch one of the deputies.

None of the deputies involved in the restraint has been identified. One female deputy was treated at a hospital for an injury she suffered in the confrontation, Gale said.

A fifth deputy put Booker in a headlock just as the female deputy began shocking him with a

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Taser with encouragement from one of the deputies, who kept repeating, "Probe his ---," Maten said. He could hear the Taser crackle repeatedly.

Booker said, "'I can't breath . . .,'" Yedo heard. Then, Booker went limp.

Booker's wrists were handcuffed behind his back in an awkward position when the deputies picked him up, each holding an arm or a leg, and carried him stomach-down to a holding cell with an unbreakable glass door.

They set him down on his stomach, with much of his weight on one shoulder and his legs bent, Yedo said. They took the handcuffs off and without checking his pulse, the officers left him on the floor of the holding cell.

The deputies walked away high-fiving and laughing, Maten said. Several inmates were saying, "'I can't believe they're doing this,'" Maten said.

Yedo said he stared at Booker, watching his chest, which wasn't moving. One deputy had stayed next to the cell and was also staring at Booker.

"I told the guy, 'Hey, that guy is not breathing,'" Yedo said.

The deputy turned and yelled at the sergeant.

" 'Sergeant, come here. Sergeant, hurry,'" Yedo said he yelled.

Channeling MLK

Booker was the son of a prominent Tennessee pastor, Benjamin Booker. The habitual criminal was arrested in Denver mostly during the 1980s and 1990s for disorderly conduct, trespass, loitering, disturbing the peace, carrying a concealed weapon and threatening assault.

In 2007 and 2008, he was homeless in downtown Memphis, said friend Dennis Lynch of Memphis. Booker often volunteered to work in soup kitchens.

He wrote a book about Martin Luther King Jr., and he sold it on the streets of Memphis, usually to tourists who heard him recite King's famous "I have a dream" speech. When he spoke, crowds of tourists gathered.

"If you closed your eyes, you would think you were in the presence of Martin Luther King," said Memphis Pastor Andrews R. Smith. "People would cry. He was always smiling. His eyes would just shine like a chipmunk."

Booker often accompanied him when he made rounds in downtown Memphis, handing out food to the homeless. They all called him "Martin" because of his speeches.

"Marvin is such a kindhearted person," Smith said. His sweet demeanor makes the

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circumstances of his death seem suspicious, he said.

When Memphis police cracked down on panhandling, Booker returned to Denver, Lynch said. George Booker, Booker's cousin, said that recently his cousin was volunteering to help the homeless at Denver churches and was trying to turn his life around.

Booker's funeral was Friday at Cathedral of Faith Community Church, the Memphis chapel where his brother C.L. Booker is the pastor. More than 200 people attended the service, in which his father gave the eulogy, Smith said.

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