

Vigil honors Ashland grad who intervened in racist attack

By John Darling For the Tidings

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Singing songs, speaking tributes and sometimes expressing anger, some 200 Ashlanders gathered at twilight Saturday in Lithia Park to honor Taliesin Myrddin, an Ashland High School graduate who was killed Friday in Portland while trying to defend two girls under verbal attack.

Gathering in a circle at the park's entrance, the mournful, often tearful crowd sang to guitar accompaniment and talked of love, understanding and the healing powers needed in a divided and contentious nation. There were few flashes of anger about the grisly fate befalling Myrddin and two other men, slashed by a knife on the MAX light rail.

Authorities say Myrddin, Ricky John Best, 53, of Happy Valley, and Micah David-Cole Fletcher, 21, of Portland were stabbed when they intervened when another man yelled racial slurs at two young women who appeared to be Muslim. Best died at the scene. Myrddin died on the way to the hospital. Fletcher's wounds were considered serious but not life-threatening.

Police are holding Jeremy Joseph Christian, 35, on suspicion of aggravated murder, attempted murder, intimidation and being a felon in possession of a weapon. He was arrested a short time after the attack when he was confronted by other men.

The attack occurred on the first day of Ramadan, the holiest time of the year for Muslims.

Myrddin's brother, Elias DeChristo, in an interview, said, "He was highly successful and a motivated and loving person who cared for the Earth and all humanity. It's a loss of huge dimensions. His message of love and acceptance was present even in his final act. It should inspire everyone."

Brothers Clint and Carl Gorbett had taken many backpack trips with “Tilly,” as Myrddin was called, and were lifelong friends.

“He was one of the most brilliant men I’ve ever known,” Clint Gorbett said. “When we were backpacking, he always kept up the joviality. His positive impact on the world could have been enormous. He had this endless potential.”

Carl Gorbett added, “He was like a brother to us, going back to (Ashland) middle school and high school. We hiked some of the Pacific Crest Trail, the coast and Trinity Alps, which he loved. He was so adventurous and would seize it by the horns. He always encouraged me to pursue my dreams.”

The Gorbetts’ mother, Sonna Bennett, noted, “He was my sons’ best friend. He had a big sense of right and wrong. He is my hero. I’m not surprised he intervened. He was going to change the world.”

Myrddin graduated last year in economics from Reed College in Portland and was working for Cadmus Group, a consulting firm in Portland.

Wiping away tears, state Rep. Pam Marsh of Ashland said, “It’s hard to figure out how to move forward from this. We’re standing up to hatred, which causes such inconceivable pain. His family is offering a path forward in their statement to the community. We chose love. There is no other choice I can think of.”

Longtime peace activist couple Irene Kai and David Wick offered rays of hope. “This underscores the tremendous need to make room for each other’s beliefs,” said Wick, executive director of the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission.

Kai noted, “Spiritually, we’re so at a loss now. It just knocks me out, living in a time like this. But we’re not backing down. We will live our values and stand up for peace.”

In remarks to the circle, Mira Sophia said, “We must be kind to ourselves, husbands, wives, children, strangers. Don’t be afraid to listen to everyone’s heart. Create relationships. Use your voice and speak out against injustice.”

Many mentioned the fact of Myrddin’s heroic stature and how he “will go down in history as one of our icons of courage,” as one person said. One pointed to “the courage it takes to raise children” and imbuing them with good values, making

such a fate all the more painful.

With loud voice and gestures, one man shouted, “When do we say ‘enough’? When do we join our hearts together as the human race? I ask myself if I have the courage to step into that situation and stop what is happening. ... We must name it when we see it.”

Many people brought candles to form the vigil’s circle. Among themselves, many questioned what they would do if faced with such a hate crime in progress.

—Reach Ashland freelance writer John Darling at jdarling@jeffnet.org.



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