

Writer's on the Range: A teenager who was killed should still be with us

June 8, 2023



If you think that race is only an issue in the country's biggest cities, consider a murder trial that recently concluded in the small town where I live, in the Rogue Valley of southern Oregon.

The defendant in this criminal case was Robert Paul Keegan, a 50-year-old white man. In November 2020, Keegan was staying at a motel in Ashland, a few miles from my home, because his house had burned down two months earlier in a wildfire.

Keegan, who had complained before about noise at the motel, testified that one night at around 4 a.m. he heard loud music and believed it was coming from the motel parking lot where a Black teenager, Aidan Ellison, was sitting in a parked car.

Ellison, 19, was staying at the motel because he'd also lost his home in the fire. A roommate told police that Ellison had trouble sleeping and had gone outside to sit in her car to avoid keeping her awake.

Keegan admitted that he used profane language in shouting at Ellison, and claimed that Ellison responded in kind.

The motel clerk testified that after Keegan complained, he checked the parking lot, heard no music, and found Ellison to be "very chill" in his car.

Then, while Ellison and the clerk were talking, Keegan entered the parking lot with a gun and confronted Ellison. The clerk, the only eyewitness to these events, testified that he tried to break up their heated argument. The argument only lasted a few minutes because suddenly, Keegan fired, killing Ellison with a single gunshot to the chest.

Keegan at first claimed that Ellison hit him in the face, causing him to fear for his life and to fire in self-defense. But photos taken that night by police showed no evidence of Keegan's face having been hit, and a medical examiner testified that an autopsy showed no evidence that Ellison had struck anyone.

Killing Ellison was "not a reasonable use of force in this situation," the prosecutor told the jury.

Faced with overwhelming evidence that a white man had killed a young and unarmed Black man, Keegan's lawyers crafted their case to appeal to the jury, which was composed only of white people.

Keegan claimed he was frightened by this tall Black person, and his lawyers told the jury that Keegan was being unfairly charged by authorities who felt pressure to be "hyper-vigilant" in a "post-George Floyd world." The reference was to nationwide protests that followed the police killing of a Black man in Minneapolis in 2020.

After hearing the arguments, the jury found Keegan not guilty of murder — a crime that would have resulted in a mandatory minimum sentence of 25 years. Instead, the jury found him guilty of manslaughter — a killing that is "committed recklessly under circumstances manifesting extreme indifference to the value of human life." That crime carries a minimum sentence of 10 years.

The judge in the case applied the minimum sentence plus one additional year each for convictions of unlawful possession of a firearm and reckless endangerment of the motel clerk.

At a community meeting in Ashland last year, Black speakers put the killing of Aidan Ellison in a context they know well. They said that unlike most white people, many people of color live with the constant fear of harassment, discrimination, or even death.

"This is a story we've heard again and again, in community after community," said Nkenge Harmon Johnson, head of the Urban League of Portland.

"Something that should have been nothing at all turns into a deadly situation, and often it's for a Black or brown person. They are killed at the hand of someone who thinks they have the right to do it, perhaps very much because of the color of the skin of their victim."

After Keegan was acquitted of murder, speakers at a protest said that regardless of the trial's outcome, justice had never been possible for Aidan Ellison, a Black young man who many local residents believe would still be alive today if he'd been white.

"Aidan's mom will never see her son again," said Ashland City Councilor Gina DuQuenne. "Aidan will never be a dad. Aidan will never be able to be a grandfather."

“Aidan will never be able to experience life because he is gone, and he’s never coming back.”

Matt Witt is a contributor to Writers on the Range, writersontherange.org, an independent nonprofit dedicated to spurring conversation about the West. He is a writer and photographer in Talent, Oregon.