

Deputy who died by suicide left haunting videos on racist policing, division: 'I've had enough' | Crime/Police

www.theadvocate.com/acadiana/news/crime_police/deputy-who-died-by-suicide-left-haunting-videos-on-racist-policing-division-ive-had-enough/article_81debc0a-663a-11eb-b3c3-2f88fd4cae7f.html

BY KATIE GAGLIANO | Staff writer, Katie Gagliano

February 3, 2021



Before deputy Clyde Kerr III took his own life Monday outside the Lafayette Parish Sheriff's Office, he left haunting final words in a series of social media videos.

Kerr, a father and military veteran, was 43 years old.

In Kerr's videos, he talked directly to the camera on a range of issues, from police brutality against Black people and mental health needs in policing, to division in society and children's exposure to murder, violence and other negative or traumatic influences. He also describes his struggle to reconcile his identity as a Black man with his profession while hinting at his impending suicide.

Being a Black man in law enforcement can be difficult, said Lafayette City Marshal Reggie Thomas, the first Black person elected to a citywide position in Lafayette.

Thomas said he watched some of the videos Kerr posted and could tell the man was deeply concerned about the way police work is going. One video that particularly resonated was of Kerr relating a conversation he had with his son in the aftermath of George Floyd's death at the hands of police.

"He had to talk to his son about how you have to react with a police officer," Thomas said. "Nobody should have to have that conversation."

Kerr's videos have garnered thousands of views since his death and are catalyzing conversation online and in the community about addressing mental health needs and the current state of policing.

Kerr said he was done serving a system that doesn't care about people like him.

"You have no idea how hard it is to put a uniform on in this day and age with everything that's going on," he said.

"My entire life has been in the service of other people ... y'all entrust me to safeguard your little ones, your small ones, the thing that's most precious to you, and I did that well. I passed security clearance in the military ... but that has allowed me to see the inner workings of things."

The videos show a man who professed he was upset by the state of society: "I've had enough."

While Kerr's videos focused on the outside world, he made small statements referencing personal turmoil. He spoke on the trauma of working the night of Lafayette Police Cpl. Michael Middlebrook's death and persevering through struggles in his life. According to court records, Kerr and his wife divorced in 2016, reconciled and again divorced in 2020.

But in his videos Kerr insisted, repeatedly, that his decision to kill himself was a conscious choice made in his right mind as a "protest." He also said the need for "dramatic and bold" action was made clear to him a week before his death and intimated it was part of a higher calling. He said he would "pass this baton to the next guy" if he could, but this was his mission.



He cited the deaths of Black people at the hands of police: Botham Jean, shot in his own apartment in Dallas in 2018; George Floyd in Minneapolis; Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Kentucky; and Trayford Pellerin, who was killed by Lafayette Police Department officers in August.

"If this feels right to you as a person, then something is wrong with you," he said.

"I understand we have a tough job, but we signed up for this. We need help. Because when you deal with the bottom rung of society, that does not give us an excuse to just do whatever you want, and that's what we're doing and we're not being held accountable."

In two of the videos, taken on Friday, Kerr sat in his cruiser outside his assigned schools; children could be heard on the playground in the background, as Kerr mentioned sharing a last wave with the students though they were unaware this would be their final interaction with him.

Blue Rolfes, spokesperson for the Diocese of Lafayette, said the St. Genevieve community is reeling from the loss and school leaders are organizing counseling sessions for students and staff.

"[Deputy Clyde Kerr] was well known for his big smile, frequent conversations with students and staff, and friendly fist bumps. We will continue to keep him and his family in our prayers. He will be greatly missed," St. Genevieve school leaders said in a newsletter to parents.

Kerr's statements on mental health, particularly in policing, struck a chord with Thomas. Early in his 30-year career with the Lafayette Police Department, Thomas said, there was a stigma surrounding any officer who sought counseling, noting that "you were looked upon as being weak."

But that has changed in recent years.

"We realized we need to do something because, nationally, a lot of officers are committing suicide," he said.

Today, LPD requires any officer who is involved in a "critical incident" to get counseling. He also said officers can get counseling without letting the department know.

"It can be anonymous," he said. "The department still pays the bills, but there is no name associated with it."

Thomas suggested law enforcement agencies may need to do more.

"Should it be something we do annually? Why not? We qualify on our weapons two times a year," he said. "There are officers who've been with the police department for 30 years who have never seen a counselor. Maybe we should require counseling once a year for everyone, not just those who have been involved in critical incidents."

Thomas said law enforcement agencies also need to have difficult conversations about the issues Kerr raised in his videos.

"Leaders of the agencies have to sit down and talk about what we're going to do differently in policing our communities," he said. "We have to seriously talk about local police reform. Not nationally — let's talk about Lafayette. Let's listen to the citizens."

'A natural leader'

Clyde Rudolph Kerr III was many things.

"Rudy" was a son of New Orleans, his dad the famed New Orleans jazz trumpeter and educator Clyde Kerr Jr., who passed away in 2010. Both men were St. Augustine High School Purple Knights.

Kerr was a soldier who served in Afghanistan and Iraq, a lawman, and a hero to the students at St. Genevieve School, where he was a school resource officer. Kerr joined the Lafayette Parish Sheriff's Office in June 2015 and had served as a patrol deputy and SWAT team member before joining the school resource officer program, according to a statement from the agency.

"My heart goes out to Deputy Kerr, his immediate family and to all of the brothers and sisters he has at the sheriff's office. We will do everything in our power to support our employees as we all grieve," Sheriff Mark Garber said in the statement.

Todd Dwyer and Kerr became friends after working at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette Police Department together in the early 2000s. Kerr would visit the Dwyers' home every week, playing with their 8 and 4-year-old children, cooking out or dreaming up his next big plan. Kerr was disciplined but also had an infectious energy, the kind of guy everyone wanted to know and be friends with, his friend said.

"No matter where he was in the world, what was going on, everybody was always smiling who was around him," Dwyer said.

The construction safety specialist said Kerr was the friend he went to for difficult conversations and hard truths — about race, politics, religion and the world their children were growing up in. Dwyer said the men didn't keep secrets from one another. He and his wife noticed a shift in Kerr in the last two weeks, but the lawman was never explicit about taking his life.

Dwyer said in conversations about struggles and life they thought he was considering a career change or other life move — not suicide. He said it's possible there was unspoken turmoil under Kerr's sunny facade, but there are too many what-ifs we'll never have answers to now.

"I just think if I could have 10 more minutes to try to talk him out of it, and if [policing issues] was his point and what he was trying to draw attention to, the thing I'd press on him ... in his career that he currently does, the lives he touches ... he has that chance or that position to make a difference in each one of those kids' lives each year, no matter how little time they have," Dwyer said.

Dwyer said he's still trying to process his initial grief and is focused on supporting his own children and Kerr's sons as they adjust to life without their father. Kerr's longtime friend said he has not watched the 43-year-old's suicide tapes, and doesn't plan to for some time, but did see a brief snippet. He barely recognized his best friend, he said.

“The face and the eyes that I saw in just the two seconds of watching it was nowhere near the person that I knew for the last 20 years. It was like whoever that was — it was not Rudy. He’d already checked out,” Dwyer said.

Calvin Richard, who graduated from St. Augustine a year ahead of Kerr, recalled how he and Kerr had thoughtful discussions about the need to reform law enforcement in the U.S. following George Floyd's murder last year. But he said Kerr at the time gave no indication that he was as distressed as he was in his final days.

"You wouldn't see this coming," Richard said. "We never had any conversations of this being on his mind."

The Marble Falls, Texas resident remembered Kerr as a capable man and fast learner who was able to take command of the tasks before him. Richard said as teens the two worked a summertime job together in the Orleans Parish Civil District Court's records room and he was impressed by how swiftly Kerr mastered the particulars of the job as the junior employee.

"I could see he was a natural leader," Richard said.

Richard said the famously tight-knit St. Augustine community was collectively grieving. Perhaps the most obvious indication was the many alums who had switched their social media avatars to the school logo with a black ribbon around it.

Duson Police Chief Kip Judice, a former sheriff's office sergeant who said he recruited Kerr to agency, said he was also shocked to hear of Kerr's suicide.

“Clyde was a warrior. Clyde was a guy who I would go into any situation with as backup and not have a worry in the world, not have to worry about my back,” Judice said. “When I got notified, my response was absolutely impossible. I thought someone spelled the name wrong or something.”

Resources

The sheriff's office said crisis intervention team members are available to provide counseling and support services to deputies and family members impacted by the news. The statement said year-round counseling and mental health services are also available.

Kerr's death and the events leading to his suicide are under investigation, LPSO said.

If you are in crisis or know someone in crisis, here are some resources:

- Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-TALK (8255). It's a free, 24/7 confidential service that provides people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress, or those around them, with support, information and local resources.
- Text "START" to 741741, the Crisis Text Line.
- Call the Veterans Crisis Line at 1-800-273-8255 (press 1) or text a message to 838255. It connects veterans and service members in crisis and their families and friends with qualified, caring U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs responders through a confidential toll-free hotline, online chat or text 24/7.
- Gay, lesbian and transgender youth can call the Trevor Project at 866-488-7386 anytime; from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m. Central time on Thursdays and Fridays, they can text "Trevor" to 202-304-1200 to start talking.

Advocate staff writers Kristin Askelson, Ben Myers and Ramon Antonio Vargas contributed to this report.