

Statement by Art Rocker, Chairman of the SCLC State of Florida

I would like to provide a few points from my perspective regarding the tragic event surrounding the deaths of young Mr. Victor Steen, Mr. Derrick Humbert and Ms. Tia Ritch.

Firstly, I don't believe Mr. Steen "fell into the path" of Officer Ard's cruiser! I do not believe that Derrick Humbert deserved to be shot with a taser, and I do not believe that Tia Ritch deserved not to receive medical care for both herself and her unborn child. I believe that the officers and the jailers got caught up in the chase itself and were determined not to let Steen, Humbert or Ritch get away at all costs. Now we know that their actions have cost us the lives of innocent young people! And yes, in the name of humanity itself, I am sure the officers and the jailers are remorseful and sincerely regret their actions regarding these instances. Personally, I don't know how any of them can sleep at night, so my prayers go out to them as well as to the grieving families of the victims!

Yes, Mr. Steen was indeed innocent in that he had NOT committed a crime!! The term "acting suspiciously" is a catch all phrase for all law enforcement officials to justify doing just about any thing they want to do to any person going about their daily business on our city streets. Acting suspiciously does NOT constitute guilt, so again Mr. Steen was surely an innocent young man! It just so happens that in poor communities like Brownsville and so many other poor communities across the country, the demographic that police generally (I hesitate to use the term "prey upon") accost are young people. This holds true when we look at the situations that occurred with Victor Steen in Pensacola, Florida; Tia Ritch in Starke, Florida; and Derrick Humbert in Bradenton, Florida. One of the reasons for this, other than high concentration, is that it is this particular group of American citizens has the "smallest public lobby of support or advocacy" with the exception of when he or she is running, dribbling, entertaining, or hitting/shooting a ball.

Unfortunately, America as a whole does not see many young people in a favorable light but rather sees them as a threat or predator that has to be dealt with; hence, it is deemed perfectly acceptable for law enforcement officers to engage in any behavior they think necessary to "keep the rest of us safe." Therefore, it is easy even for the political moderates among us to almost automatically take the side of the law enforcement official when there is a question of right and wrong or of foul play. Let us be realistic, law enforcement officials across this country, in addition to being good guys and gals for the most part, are highly respected and are surely needed to keep the peace; ergo, we should be giving them the benefit of the doubt. However, as even many law enforcement officers would admit, in being a microcosm of society they too have their share of not-so-good guys among their ranks!

It is so unfortunate that the "code of silence" still prevails in the ranks of this paramilitary institution known as law enforcement professionals. Even when an individual completely disagrees with certain tactics or abhorrent behavior on the part of a fellow officer, the

code calls for one to keep his or her mouth shut. There are notable reasons for this, primarily being ostracized by the very institution they serve. The points made by Mr. Joseph Wambaugh, a former law enforcement officer, in his book *The Blue Knight*, make this “code of silence” syndrome vividly clear. What is NOT clear (or acceptable) is the numbing and almost staggering silence of our public officials as well as civic and business leaders in Starke, Pensacola, and Bradenton, Florida; not to mention the local media coverage in some of these areas of these tragic events. Literally no words of condolence or concern were offered by our public officials to the families of Mr. Steen, Ms. Tia Ritch, Mr. Humbert or to the general public until we mobilized and initiated a second “Peace March” on City Hall in Pensacola, Florida this past Thursday, and still the voices were few and very guarded! Where is the leadership on this issue? Why is it so hard to speak out? We are not necessarily asking for our officials to speak out against the police department, but to speak up for our fellow citizens – yes, our fellow citizens regardless of socio-economic status.

Again, Mr. Steen, Ms. Tia Ritch, and Mr. Humbert were not guilty of ANYTHING!!! We have to *get rid* of the “stinking thinking” that being young in America nearly automatically makes one guilty! Let us *vanquish* the acceptability of profiling and apprehending our young people while they are guiltlessly standing around, walking, biking or driving! The common, and sadly the first, thought by most citizens when they hear of the arrests young Americans is that “they had to have been doing something they weren’t supposing to...” The question I have is what possibly could Steen, Ritchie and Humbert have been doing, besides exercising their citizenship? Why are these negative attitudes conjured up in the minds of people in the first place? Unfortunately, there are some in our community who would say to themselves and to others close to them that being a young American is enough to substantiate guilt. Fortunately, fewer and fewer decent citizens within our community feel that way, therefore the largest groups protesting Mr. Steen’s very unfortunate death are young white people, white people who are fed up with our police “doing business the old fashion way” in their treatment of our African American citizens! In particularly, Pensacola, Florida has “let the youngest among us lead the way”...

So if you are interested in being respectful of life, being compassionate for those who have suffered (and will continue to suffer these personal losses), stand up – speak up and let your voice be heard. I am not asking anyone to take sides or pass judgment on anyone, but to let the system (which is not necessarily the most reliable given its history) do what it is charged to do – find the truth! To quote an international friend of mine, “the truth is simple.” We can call for that, can’t we? We can insist that folks do the right thing for all the right reasons, can’t we? If the jailers and officers are exonerated of all responsibility for the death of Mr. Steen, Ms. Ritch and Mr. Humbert, I believe the entire community will be negatively affected. You don’t right a wrong by pretending that it did not occur! We all most see that there was something entirely WRONG with these incidents, and two wrongs do not make a right, as we all know.

There must be consequences for everyone’s actions, be it the person in *or* out of uniform. There must also be an element of accountability levied from the jailers and officers to the

Sheriff's Department, the Police Department and the city leadership. No one is happy about what happened, but we all are responsible for what is to be rightfully done as a result. I pray for the strength, courage and wisdom for police and city leadership in all areas of Florida regarding these watershed events which have sadly cost us the untimely death of three young Americans!