

Officials: Man Criticized Group Before D.C. Shooting

BY ERIC TUCKER AND PETE YOST
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A Virginia man suspected of shooting and wounding a security guard at the Washington headquarters of a social conservative lobbying group on Wednesday made a negative reference about the organization's work before opening fire, a law enforcement official said.

Police said the man, identified as Floyd Lee Corkins II, entered the front lobby of the Family Research Council in downtown Washington around 10:45 a.m. Wednesday, began arguing with a security guard and then shot him in the arm. Corkins, 28, was restrained by the wounded guard and others and was being held Wednesday night on a charge of assault with a deadly weapon, the FBI said.

Authorities were interviewing Corkins to determine a reason for the shooting and were canvassing his neighborhood in Herndon, Va., outside Washington. TV news footage showed the suspect, a large man with a shaved head in an unbuttoned striped shirt, being led to a car in hand restraints.

Though authorities did not publicly reveal a motive, advocacy groups across the ideological spectrum condemned the violence, with some casting it as a hate crime. President Barack Obama was concerned about the wellbeing of the guard, a White House spokesman said, and Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney also said he was appalled.

"Today's attack is the clearest sign we've seen that labeling pro-marriage groups as 'hateful' must end," Brian Brown, the president of the National Organization for Marriage, said in a statement.

The Family Research Council, headquartered in a busy downtown tourist district, strongly opposes gay marriage and abortion and says it advocates "faith, family and freedom in public policy and public opinion." The conservative group maintains a powerful lobbying presence on those causes, testifying before Congress and reviewing legislation. Its president, Tony Perkins, said the group's main concern was with the wounded guard.

Corkins who had been volunteering recently at a community center for lesbian, gay, bisexual and

transgender people, made a negative comment about the organization's activity before the shooting, but the reference was not specific, one of the law enforcement officials said. Two law enforcement officials said Corkins was carrying sandwiches from Chick-fil-A, a fast-food chain whose president's opposition to same sex marriage recently placed the restaurant at the center of a national cultural debate.

James McLunkin, assistant director in charge of the FBI's Washington field office, said soon after the shooting that authorities didn't yet know enough about the gunman and his state to mind to know what inspired the attack.

The guard, Leo Johnson, was conscious and breathing after the shooting and was being interviewed and treated at a hospital. Authorities credited him for thwarting a shooting they said could have been much worse.

"The security guard here is a hero, as far as I'm concerned," said D.C. Police Chief Cathy Lanier.

Corkins had been volunteering for about the past six months at The DC Center for the LGBT Community, said David Mariner, executive director of the community center, which is in Northwest Washington. He usually staffed the center's front desk on Saturdays, and his most recent shift was about two weeks ago.

"He always struck me as a kind, gentle and unassuming young man. I'm very surprised that he could be involved in something like this," Mariner said.

Authorities seized Corkins' car at a northern Virginia Metro station, and were going door-to-door speaking with neighbors, several of whom spoke highly of the family.

"They were always so sweet and so nice," said Stephanie Meyer, who lives a few doors down. "They are awesome people. We never had any issues."

According to a U.S. Defense Department official, Corkins is not a member of the Air Force, but he may have lived at Andrews Air Force base in some other capacity in the past, possibly as a dependent or family member.

The official spoke on condition of anonymity because the official was not authorized to provide personal information.

Amy Biondi and her husband

Steve were visiting Washington from Long Island with their daughter and a friend and tried to ask officers for help with a parking meter when they were told there was a situation they had to deal with. The door to the FRC was opened, and an officer could be heard repeatedly shouting, "Put the gun down, put the gun down."

"Next thing you know there are police officers swarming the area," said Biondi, 45, a massage therapist from St. James, N.Y.

The family didn't get a close look inside, but they said the man that officers were talking to seemed to comply immediately.

Groups aligned with conservative causes lambasted the shooting, but so did a coalition of more than two dozen organizations promoting gay, lesbian and transgender rights, which said it rejected and condemned the attack.

White House spokesman Jay Carney said the president, who was traveling in Iowa Wednesday, was informed of the shooting shortly after 1 p.m.

"The president expressed his concern for the individual injured in the shooting and his strong belief that this type of violence has no place in our society," Carney said.

Romney said in a statement that he was appalled. "There is no place for such violence in our society," he said. "My prayers go out to the wounded security guard and his family, as well as all the people at the Family Research Council whose sense of security has been shattered by today's horrific events."

The headquarters of the FRC is in the city's bustling Chinatown neighborhood, near the Verizon Center, the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery and several museums, restaurants and shops.

In the past month, the FRC had forcefully defended Chick-fil-A President Dan Cathy for his remarks in opposition to gay marriage, which brought the fast-food chain to the forefront of the nation's culture wars.

Mariner said he did not know Corkins well or have any conversations with him about the Chick-fil-A controversy or other political issues of interest to the gay community.

"I really only talked to him about volunteering, so I couldn't say anything about anything else," Mariner said.

Park

From Page 1

The land that houses the park actually has its origins as part of a Hutterite colony.

The park was purchased from the Milltown Colony in 1922, and early reports note the construction of cabins in the 1920s and the addition of the ballroom at a later date. The park became popular for roller skating, ball games, picnics and horseshoe tournaments.

But arguably, Island Park became best known for its ballroom and dances.

According to records, one the biggest single nights for Island Park came in the 1960s when Jerry Lee Lewis, Conway Twitty and Gene Pitney were apparently all booked at the same time. Throughout its history, Island Park booked musicians ranging from Lawrence Welk and Fats Domino to The Grassroots, Tommy James and the Shondels, Ivory and Johnny Holmes.

In fact, the effort to restore Island Park began when Brown and her two sisters attended this spring's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction event in Sioux Falls.

The hall of fame event brought back a rush of memories, and the three women visited the Milltown site, Brown said.

"Prior to that, we hadn't been to Island Park for a long time," she said. "We got to thinking, perhaps if we started a non-profit organization, it could be preserved. So we went to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and talked to some people."

The effort led Brown to Our Home, Inc., a facility for troubled teens with sites in Huron and Parkston that owned the Island Park property.

"I called them up and talked to (Our Home administrator) Steve Gubbrud. I asked him if we could make some arrangements for a non-profit organization to take over the park," Brown said. "Steve talked to his board of directors, and they liked the idea. They made an agreement, so when the Milltown Island Park Association was incorporated by the Secretary of State for South Dakota, Our Home transferred the land to us. It happened just a few weeks ago."

What had begun as an idea at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame banquet in April had quickly taken shape. The next step came in soliciting public support, and Brown was pleasantly surprised at the interest.

"We had an open meeting in May in Parkston, just to see who else might be interested in this idea," she said. "We had 34 people who showed up, and everyone said, 'OK, go for it.' Every one of them volunteered to do something. It was just amazing."

The Milltown Island Park Association

was formed, dedicated to restore, preserve and maintain the park. The interim board consists of Kay Adkins Brown, chairman; Mary Maxwell, vice chairman; Kim Juhnke, secretary; Doug Werning, treasurer; and Jerry Schilling, Bart Laber and Larry Wuertzer, board members.

Laber, who grew up in the Parkston area, said he was excited to see the effort to restore Island Park. The park, particularly the former ballroom, still carries marvelous memories, he said.

And now, the park can provide marvelous opportunities, Laber added.

"During the last three months, we have had tremendous response from volunteers," he said. "Right now, we're still working with stutter steps. But this will provide a tremendous recreation area for the public, and we are preserving a tremendous amount of history."

As part of that effort, the Island Park historical committee — headed by Terry Gajkowski — is working to collect memorabilia, or copies of it, related to Milltown and Island Park. Tentative plans call for a museum in Parkston as well as historical markers for the site.

"Milltown has an incredible history not only for Island Park, but there was also a Pony Express station," Brown said. "And there was an old fort up the river that doesn't exist anymore."

The park doesn't charge any fees, but donations are taken for larger projects in the works. Donations can be sent to: Milltown Island Park Association, Box 413, Parkston SD 57366.

The Sept. 15 grand opening has been scheduled for Island Park with a number of activities planned. The grand opening will also provide a celebration for the rapid success in restoring the park.

"I have never seen a community of people band together so quickly to do so much. I have been involved with a lot of non-profit organizations. But this volunteerism seen in Milltown Island Park is unlike any I have seen," Brown said.

"It's important that the park exist and be preserved for the next generation. When I bring my grandchildren down there, it will be the fifth generation of my family to go to that island."

While the Island Park ballroom may be part of the past, the park's history will continue, Brown said.

"It's a wonderful story about the people that love the place," she said. "When you sit down and dream, you know it can come true. And all of these people are dreaming the same dream."

For more information, visit online at <http://milltownislandpark.org>

You can follow Randy Dockendorf on Twitter at twitter.com/RDockendorf

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