

Star-Telegram

Arlington church overflows with mourners for slain officer

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By Mitch Mitchell

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ARLINGTON -- God has a plan, Ruby Odom told the mourners at Mount Olive Baptist Church on Tuesday morning.

"God has his own timing," said Odom, the wife of former Arlington Mayor Elzie Odom.

It may not be clear why 24-year-old church member Jillian Michelle Smith was taken away as she was, Odom said.

"The things God has planned may not happen right away," she said. "But we need not be anxious or in despair. Wait for it -- it will surely come."

Smith, a rookie Arlington police officer, was killed Dec. 28 while answering a call from a woman who needed help.

On Tuesday her fellow officers filled about a third of the balcony of the church, near the place where Smith often sat.

"We will miss that sweet face in the southeast corner of our balcony," Odom said.

The sanctuary was filled and overflow seats were set up in the gymnasium and outside. Among the mourners were elected officials and police chiefs from throughout the Metroplex, as well as officers from across the state. Arlington Mayor Robert Cluck was there, as were Fort Worth Police Chief Jeff Halstead and Dallas Police Chief David Brown.

'A saint'

The church's pastor, the Rev. James Thompson Jr., said that before Smith was a police officer, she was a Christian who became a "saint in the eyes of the Lord."

"It's been brought to everyone's attention that we lost a police officer," Thompson said. "And I have to thank everyone at the Arlington Police Department, because they have done everything for the family that they could have done."

"But as a preacher, I have to put this in its proper perspective. When you die as a saint, it's a higher priority than dying as a police officer. Precious in the sight of the Lord, is the death of his saints."

Fulfilling a dream

Smith graduated cum laude from the University of Texas at Arlington in 2009 with a bachelor's degree in criminology and criminal justice. She fulfilled her lifelong dream of graduating from the Arlington Police Academy in August, and swore to protect the lives of the city's residents.

While answering a low-priority call, Smith was shot by Barnes Samuel Nettles, who also shot and killed Kimberly Carter, 29, police have said.

Carter was supposed to be alone with her 11-year-old daughter. But moments after Smith arrived at the apartment, Nettles returned with a gun and fired in the girl's direction. According to authorities, Smith placed herself in the line of fire while the girl ran to another apartment and survived.

'All-American girl'

Police officers stood at attention during a procession to the cemetery. The police procession took about an hour to go from the church in the 300 block of West Sanford Street to Moore Memorial Gardens, 1219 N. Davis St., only a few blocks away.

Amid the officers standing near her grave, Arlington Police Chief Theron Bowman gave her parents the American flag that was draped over her coffin.

On Monday, during a vigil, Bowman called Smith an "all-American girl" who achieved her dream of being an Arlington police officer.

On Tuesday, Bowman said to her family, "May this flag serve as a constant reminder of officer Smith's devotion."

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