



Hutchins at 933 Neal Street

The Middleman

Following the deadly police shooting of an elderly Atlanta woman, the Reverend Markel Hutchins has criticized the APD. Is he the new generation's civil rights leader—or a self-appointed wannabe?

IT PLAYED OUT like a gritty HBO police drama. Just days before Thanksgiving 2006, Kathryn Johnston was inside her home at 933 Neal Street when she heard suspicious sounds outside her front door. The eighty-seven-year-old, who never married or had any children, had lived in the quaint single-story northwest Atlanta house for about seventeen years. The area had been plagued with crime for years, so Johnston, a feisty woman whose vitality belied her age, wasn't taking any chances. She retrieved the rusty .38 revolver she'd always kept around for protection.

Without warning, a group of men dressed in bulletproof vests and carrying riot shields burst through her front door.

She panicked, apparently firing one shot that landed in the roof of her front porch. Three officers responded with thirty-nine shots; at least five pierced Johnston's body.

The men, it turns out, were Atlanta Police Department narcotics officers who had obtained a “no-knock” search warrant for Johnston's home based on a tip from a suspected drug dealer that a kilo of cocaine was inside a home on Neal Street. One officer handcuffed the mortally wounded Johnston while two others searched the house.

AS JOHNSTON LAY BLEEDING on the living room floor of her beige brick home trimmed in pastel

green, twenty-nine-year-old Reverend Markel Hutchins was at his ex-girlfriend's southwest Atlanta home arranging green plastic houses on the board of a Monopoly game he was playing with her son. His cell phone rang. It was a student he had mentored years ago, calling about the incident on Neal Street.

“Something in my spirit told me I *needed* to go out there,” says Hutchins, an associate minister of the Philadelphia Baptist Church in Atlanta. Within three hours, he was among the APD investigators, journalists, and other spectators who had come to see what transpired at 933 Neal Street. Johnston's distraught family members appointed him their

“His involvement in the Neal Street case and the Wilson case reflects an irresponsibility of immense proportion,” contends Senator Vincent Fort (D-Atlanta), an outspoken critic of Hutchins. “Setting up meetings with and making common cause with the prosecutor [in the Wilson case] is like Dr. King telling Bull Connor he was right.”

spokesperson, and before night’s end, Hutchins had led an impromptu news conference on their behalf.

There were a lot more questions than answers that night, but it was obvious to everyone—the police, Johnston’s family, and members of the media—that this situation was not going to be resolved quickly. The APD narcotics officers involved—Gregg Junnier, Jason R. Smith, and Arthur Tesler—initially claimed a police informant told them he had bought \$50 worth of crack cocaine from a man at Johnston’s home earlier that day. In order to get the special warrant, they told a magistrate judge they could get a confidential informant to make a buy there to prove there were drugs inside. After the shooting, they stuck by their story, claiming the marijuana found in Johnston’s basement was the remnants of a botched drug raid.

Johnston’s family—namely her outspoken niece Sarah Dozier, who is in her seventies—and community leaders refuted the claims, insisting there was no way Johnston had any drugs.

Atlanta Police Chief Richard Pennington placed the entire narcotics unit—seven officers and one sergeant—on administrative leave while federal and state

investigators scrutinized the case. “It was important to me and to the department that the public have trust in the unit,” Chief Pennington told *Atlanta* magazine in September of this year. “Since its integrity was put in question by some former officers, I thought it best to replace all personnel within the unit.”

Ultimately, Atlanta police informant Alex White stepped forward to tell investigators that the officers involved in the shooting had asked him to lie and say he’d bought drugs from a man in Johnston’s house. In April, roughly five months after Johnston’s death, Junnier and Smith pleaded guilty to charges of manslaughter in state court and conspiracy to violate civil rights in federal court. They admitted to planting marijuana in Johnston’s home and concocting a phony story that led a judge to give them a no-knock warrant. In exchange for their cooperation with a wider probe of alleged corruption within the department, Junnier was sentenced to ten years and one month in prison, and Smith received twelve years and seven months. Tesler, who is currently suspended, is fighting state charges that he lied to FBI agents. APD is cooperating with that investigation.

In the past year, Pennington has dismantled the entire narcotics squad and implemented other changes: Narcotics officers rotate off the unit every two to three years, and there’s a stiffer supervisory review of search warrants.

HUTCHINS LATCHED ONTO the Neal Street shooting like a pit bull in attack mode. As details of the raid were revealed, Hutchins began fighting for justice on behalf of a woman he’d never met. Days after the shooting, he met with Pennington and later spoke for the family at a news conference at Lindsay Street Baptist Church, a few blocks from Johnston’s home. Angry residents packed the meeting, during which Hutchins announced he was heading to Washington, D.C. “I had the opportunity to meet with some high-ranking officials in the [Department of Justice] civil rights division and community relations board,”

Hutchins shrugs off assertions that he's an ambulance chaser or a counterfeit civil rights leader. "My intention is not to try and fill his shoes and try to be another Dr. King," he says. "I just want the Lord to use me as a vehicle for justice. That will fill a great sense of purpose in my life."

recalls Hutchins. "One thing I stressed is that we did not want them to limit their focus exclusively to what happened to Ms. Johnston. I felt this was a pattern—this was more than just some police officers who made a mistake."

The demise of an elderly black woman at the hands of white police officers, in many ways, seemed the ideal cause for Hutchins to adopt. The youngest of three children, Hutchins always hankered to tackle racially charged social issues head on. As a teenager he was elected the first black student government association president at Stone Mountain High. By 1997, as a sophomore at Morehouse College—where he enrolled to follow in the footsteps of his idol, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.—he founded the National Youth Connection, an Atlanta-based youth empowerment organization. Before long he was rubbing elbows with some of the nation's best-known civil rights leaders, including the Reverend Al Sharpton and the Reverend Jesse Jackson, whom he considers his mentors to this day. Local icons such as former Southern Christian Leadership Council President Joseph Lowery and former Atlanta mayors Andrew Young and Maynard Jackson knew him by name.

Enthralled with the allure of traveling the national speakers circuit, Hutchins

dropped out of Morehouse in his senior year after proving that he, like his mentors, could “make headlines” speaking out on hot-button issues such as police brutality and racial profiling.

Despite these efforts, many outside of civil rights circles had never heard of Hutchins until Johnston’s case and the meeting he arranged earlier this year with the Douglas County district attorney who prosecuted the controversial ten-year child molestation sentence of Georgia teen Genarlow Wilson. Hutchins’s efforts have prompted the question, *Just who is this guy?* Shameless self-promoter? Anointed minister? Youthful phenom? King wannabe? Tireless public servant? Media opportunist? Gifted orator? The answer depends on whom you ask.

“His involvement in the Neal Street case and the Wilson case reflects an irresponsibility of immense proportion,” contends Senator Vincent Fort (D-Atlanta), one of the most outspoken critics of Hutchins. “Setting up meetings with and making common cause with the prosecutor [in the Wilson case] is like Dr. King telling Bull Connor he was right.”

Hutchins shrugs off assertions that he’s an ambulance chaser or a counterfeit civil rights leader. “My intention is not to try and fill his shoes and try to be another Dr. King,” he says. “I just want the Lord to use me as a vehicle for justice. That will fill a great sense of purpose in my life.”

DESPITE THE MANY CHANGES that have been implemented since the shooting, Chief Pennington says the toughest challenge has been regaining community trust. In the past year, he says, he and his command staff have attended community meetings, met with citizens, and worked with religious leaders on community outreach in an attempt to mend the situation. “All the good work our officers do each day was nullified by the actions of



GO TO ATLANTAMAGAZINE.COM FOR MORE DETAILS ON CHANGES THE APD IMPLEMENTED FOLLOWING THE NEAL STREET INCIDENT.

a few people,” Pennington says. “It is our mission and responsibility, along with every thing else we do day-in, day-out, to re-earn the trust of the community.”

For the most part, Johnston’s family has declined to comment. Hutchins says Sarah Dozier has turned down interview requests from *60 Minutes* and the producers of *Oprah*, preferring to allow Hutchins to speak about the case.

In the end, Hutchins says he’s pleased the case seems to have uncovered deep-seated police corruption. Other community leaders, however, have criticized Hutchins’s support of the sentences and his surprisingly favorable characterization of the convicted cops. “If the family selected him as a spokesperson I have no problem with that,” adds Senator Fort. “But him telling us that these rogue cops who used their power and authority to lie, kill, and racially profile are ‘good guys’ is infuriating . . . The number-one objective should have been to prosecute to the fullest extent of the law those who methodically murdered Ms. Johnston and conspired to destroy evidence. What’s more important—prosecuting murderers or getting testimony about the alleged use of quotas in the APD? This is sending a message that certain lives are valued more than others.”

Hutchins notes that in July he testified at a Congressional hearing before two House judiciary subcommittees focused on officer abuses of police informants. During the hearing, lawmakers and witnesses repeatedly referred to Johnston’s case as evidence that abuse of police snitches is as severe a problem as informants who lie to police to get lenient treatment. Hutchins hopes the hearing will yield federal reform legislation bearing Johnston’s name.

“This was never about vengeance, it’s always been about justice,” he says. “The outcome of this case has sent a strong message to police officers everywhere that when they lie and try to cover it up they will be held responsible. That’s now the legacy of the life of Kathryn Johnston.” ■

SEND COMMENTS OR SUGGESTIONS TO
CRTHOMAS@ATLANTAMAG.EMMIS.COM