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Ronald Johnson's Steady Voice Makes Itself Heard Above the Shouting

By DAN BARRY AUG. 24, 2014

FERGUSON, Mo. — It will be hot in St. Louis on Monday morning, as temperatures approach 100 degrees and multitudes flock to a church on Dr. Martin Luther King Drive for the funeral of a young black man whose shooting death by a white police officer ignited unrest and renewed a familiar national conversation. There will be grieving relatives, resolute citizens, solemn politicians, several celebrities, and even emissaries from the White House.

Absent from the Friendly Temple Missionary Baptist Church, though, will be a tall, bald black man who now personifies this touchstone moment nearly as much as the 18-year-old being laid to rest. He is Capt. Ronald S. Johnson of the Missouri Highway Patrol, who, in many days of working to restore calm here in Ferguson, has redefined leadership in crisis: equal parts police official, preacher, mediator and neighbor, unafraid to convey his inner conflict, unafraid to cry.

Captain Johnson has already publicly expressed his condolences to the family of the dead man, Michael Brown, and he has thanked Mr. Brown for being a catalyst for change. But according to a spokesman for the highway patrol, the captain will be focusing Monday on continuing to provide security — though, out of respect, he will not be granting interviews to the news media.

“I just know that emotions are going to be high,” Captain Johnson

said during an interview on Friday that was itself emotional. “But I think we have to respect those emotions. I think it would be wrong for me today to say, ‘Don’t let your emotions get high,’ because my emotions have been high in my lifetime when I’ve lost someone.”

Such comments reflect Captain Johnson’s empathy for the anguish in this black community, yet the struggle to balance that empathy with his law-enforcement duties is occasionally revealed. At another nightly protest a few days ago, the captain bowed his head to pray with a few young black men, their hands resting on his blue uniform shirt. When he raised his head, his eyes were red. He accepted a hug — and abruptly left.

“There has been that conflict,” the captain said. “But I see myself as a man first. Then a policeman, and being a black man.”

He added: “I’ve just tried to stand on that line of what’s right. Just walk down that line, and not try to separate my feet from side to side.”

For days after the shooting of an unarmed Mr. Brown by a Ferguson police officer, Darren Wilson, an episode under grand jury investigation, the nation was both riveted and appalled by images of tear-gas plumes, armored vehicles and looting. That is why, on Aug. 14, Gov. Jay Nixon summoned Captain Johnson from relative obscurity and put him in charge.

Officials say that he was chosen not because he is a black man who grew up in the area, but because he is the commander of the highway patrol’s Troop C, whose territory includes Ferguson.

“He happened to be here, and he happened to be African-American,” said Maj. J. Bret Johnson, his immediate supervisor and no relation. “He was perfect for it. God took care of us there in that respect.”

Captain Johnson’s official biography would say that he was 51; the son of a security officer at St. Louis University and a receiving clerk at a pharmaceutical company; born in St. Louis and moved at an early age to the nearby suburbs. Married and the father of two adult children. The captain of Troop C for more than a decade, and the only one of the patrol’s nine troop commanders who is black.

But there are discrete moments that formed the man. He remembers first hearing a common racist epithet at a local suburban school, where he and his two siblings were the sole black students. He also remembers his mother baking a chocolate cake for some event at that school, only to have his sister return home with the cake because, he said, “Nobody would eat it.”

His parents said everything would be O.K., he recalled. “And we ate the cake.”

He has also known loss. His father. His younger brother. Four years ago, a member from his troop, Sgt. Joseph G. Schuengel, was killed in a helicopter crash, and the emotions of the usually reserved captain were raw, and public.

When the governor put him in charge, Captain Johnson said, he initially feared that this responsibility would be too much to bear. The only place he could find to collect his thoughts in private was a bathroom at the command center, in a parking lot a few hundred yards from the nightly turmoil.

“I closed the door and looked in the mirror, and just began to pray,” he said. “I just asked God to let me do the right thing. Do the thing that would be right for everybody.”

He felt better when he came out, but he still had no plan, other than a resolve “to go out and let everyone know that we were going to be in this together.”

Stress has defined each day. “We’ve yelled, we’ve cried, we’ve screamed, we’ve hugged,” said Major Johnson, the captain’s superior. “This is a huge, huge responsibility for everyone in the command here. No one wants to see our state fail.”

Now, nearly every day, Captain Johnson has found brief refuge in that same bathroom, often waiting in line even though other restrooms have become available. “That’s become my place of peace,” he said.

His days have been a blur of planning sessions, interviews, walkabouts and community meetings, including one at a local church in which his

heartfelt comments, delivered with the rise-and-fall cadence of a gifted minister, included: “This is my neighborhood. You are my family. You are my friends. And I am you.”

And his nights have been a seesaw struggle to return damaged West Florissant Avenue, the stage for the protests, to some semblance of its preshooting routine. Each night has presented a different challenge: this one tense, this one quiet; this one ending in tear gas; this one ending in prayer.

The captain has been yelled at, and he has raised his voice (though he has since resolved not to do so again, believing that no one hears if everyone is shouting). He has answered reporters’ many, many questions, and he has ordered the arrest of a Canadian journalist who approached him at a tense moment late one night. He has been called a hero — “You are the man,” Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr. told him — and a suppressor of First Amendment rights, too soft for some, too hard for others.

But Captain Johnson’s approach, which he describes as “getting out, listening, and doing something with what you’ve heard,” has eased tensions and, at least for now, won the night.

His performance has been “nothing short of remarkable,” Governor Nixon said. “He strikes that balance of kind of tough and patient at the same time.”

His supervisor, Major Johnson, marvels at Captain Johnson’s focus on ensuring safety for both residents and police officers. But what has been most impressive, he said, is his colleague’s ability “to hold up under this amount of stress.”

During the interview on Friday afternoon, Captain Johnson was asked what he hoped his 21-year-old son — who he has said wears his pants saggy, his hat cocked to its side, and has tattoos on his arms — would take away from these past two weeks in Ferguson.

His voice broke when he began to answer, and he looked down for 20 seconds as he found his composure. Looking up finally, with eyes

reddened, the father answered:

“That no matter what you become, you can never forget who you are.”

John Eligon and Richard Perry contributed reporting from Ferguson.

A version of this article appears in print on August 25, 2014, on page A10 of the New York edition with the headline: A Steady Voice Makes Itself Heard Above the Shouting.

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