



## 'Don't shoot.' Sister of mentally ill man killed by Lawrence County deputy relives shooting

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The family of a **Lawrence County man killed by a sheriff's deputy last week** wants justice, but they also want to spread awareness of the roadblocks to getting help for a loved one with mental illness.

Shane Nathaniel Watkins, 39, was shot and killed

Shane Watkins (Courtesy of Watkins family)

Thursday when deputies responded to a domestic

disturbance at the home he shared with his mother, Darlene Watkins, in the Langtown community. Authorities have said that Watkins, who was schizophrenic, charged at the deputies with a sharp weapon.

His sister, Yvonne Mote, confirmed that it was a box cutter Watkins had in his hand, but disputed any suggestion that her brother would have attacked officers.

"He's not ever been violent. In a disagreement, he'll throw a tantrum, but he'll leave and go take a walk. He's afraid of cops," Mote said.

Alabama's State Bureau of Investigation is staying quiet while investigators there probe the shooting. The SBI was called in by Lawrence County Sheriff Gene Mitchell.

"The SBI will report its findings to the district attorney. Nothing further will be released as the investigation is ongoing," said senior Trooper Johnathan Appling, a spokesman for the agency.

Mote spoke at length with **AL.com** about her brother Monday, always referring to him in the present tense. She described him as a lover of music who enjoyed being around his family, particularly before a diagnosis in his mid-20s led to his ongoing struggle to stay well.

**[Related story: Woman launches GoFundMe page for mentally ill brother killed by Lawrence County deputy]**

She also detailed the struggle her family faced in the week before Watkins died. Her brother, who had stopped taking his medication a few weeks before, had begun to suffer from delusions.

"He had started telling everyone he was the 'god of the fifth element' and that he had to cleanse the Earth with a gallon of whiskey and beer," Mote said. "He needed help."

More than a week before the shooting, Darlene Watkins sought that help for her son from a mental health facility in

Moulton, where Watkins had reportedly been a patient before. Because his previous case file had been closed out, however, he would have to start the process all over.

It would take several days for him to be seen by a doctor.

"They could tell he needed help, but he had to start over again," Mote said. "They told my mother, 'If anything happens, call the police or take him to Decatur General.'"

At first, his sister said, Watkins refused to go to the hospital, which is now called Decatur Morgan Hospital. She said she eventually talked him into it by convincing him he needed to tell doctors about his need to cleanse the Earth with alcohol.

"I told him, 'Mom's not going to buy you any beer or whiskey until you go and tell them about it,'" Mote said.

Mote said while her mother and brother were at the hospital for a mental health assessment, she called Decatur Morgan West, which houses the hospital's psychiatric ward, to find out if it had a bed available. It didn't.

Mote said that she was told the main hospital could reroute her brother to another facility that did have a bed. That didn't happen, though, and he was again sent home with their mother.

Leigh Hays, a spokeswoman for Decatur Morgan Hospital, said that regulations of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996, or HIPAA, make it impossible for her to give any details of a patient's care.

"I couldn't even access it," Hays said.

Frustrated, Mote said, she called the Lawrence County Sheriff's Office on the Sunday before the shooting to ask that deputies conduct a welfare check on her brother. She said she was told that the department did not have a deputy assigned to mental health cases and that her brother's condition was not a criminal issue.

"I said, 'It's not a criminal issue yet,'" Mote said.

Mitchell could not be reached for comment Monday afternoon.

Mote said the Sheriff's Office suggested their mother go to the probate judge to see if she could get Watkins involuntarily committed. Officials there reportedly told her that she would need to hire a lawyer.

Both mother and son were on disability and could scarcely afford an attorney, Mote said, but her mother did as instructed.

"Mom had an appointment with a lawyer on Friday," Mote said.

Watkins was shot and killed on Thursday.

**'He doesn't have a gun, don't shoot'**

Mote said she was on the phone with her mother when the shooting occurred. Darlene Watkins had called her daughter because Shane Watkins had gotten upset that she would not let him take the car to the store.

He was angry, but not violent, Mote said.

"He's like a little kid throwing a temper tantrum," she said.

When he started threatening to kill his dog and himself with a gun he did not have, Mote said she saw the chance to possibly get help through the Sheriff's Office. Mote called for help.

While she did that, her brother also called 911 to tell deputies that his mother was holding him hostage, she said. At one point, he found a knife, but his mother took it away from him.

That's when he found the box cutter.

Mote was back on the phone with her mother when deputies pulled up at their home on County Road 249.

"He said, 'The police are going to kill me,'" Mote said. "Mom said, 'No, they're here to help you.'"

Mote said she heard her mother tell the deputies that Watkins did not have a gun and ask them to bring a Taser.

Then, her mother screaming, "He doesn't have a gun, don't shoot."

Then there were gunshots, Mote said. Her mother came back on the line, saying Watkins had been shot.

Mote repeatedly said that her brother could not have been a threat to the deputies, in part because he had back surgery just a couple of months before he was killed. She said she would like to see justice done, whatever that may be.

"They didn't have to use that kind of force," she said.

Reflecting on the many attempts to get Watkins help before it was too late, Mote pointed to the recent closings of mental health clinics and hospitals across Alabama. **North Alabama Regional Hospital, the only state-run mental health facility in the Tennessee Valley, will close its doors this summer**, and **Alabama Psychiatric Services closed its doors last month**, leaving about 28,000 patients statewide scrambling to find new doctors.

"With the hospitals closing, there's going to be a lot more of this going on," Mote said.

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