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Argument between Parks and Rec worker, teens escalated to fight and shooting, charges say



Police cordon off the Jimmy Lee Recreation Center in St. Paul after a shooting on Jan. 18, 2023. A teen was taken to Regions Hospital after being shot in the head, police say. (Nick Woltman / Pioneer Press)



An argument outside a St. Paul recreation center escalated to a fight and a city Parks and Rec employee shooting a 16-year-old in the head, according to an attempted murder charge filed Friday.

Witnesses informed police that Exavir Dwayne Binford Jr. was upset that a girl let her relative into the Oxford Community Center, which includes Jimmy Lee Recreation Center and Great River Water Park, because the building was supposed to be locked after a fight. Binford cursed at her and the 16-year-old intervened.

Binford told police after his arrest that the 16-year-old and another teen fought him and he felt threatened by them.

Investigators asked Binford why he shot “when they were all just standing there, (and) Binford had no explanation and said it was just in the moment and he was sorry,” according to the criminal complaint.

The 16-year-old underwent emergency neurosurgery and remained in the intensive care unit Friday with a life-threatening injury.

In court on Friday, an attorney for Binford said he acted in self defense.

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Fights before shooting

The injured teen is a student at Central Senior High School, his uncle said Thursday.

The complaint against Binford gives the following information from prosecutors:

Exavir Dwayne Binford
(Courtesy of the Ramsey
County Sheriff's Office)

Binford said a Central High School staff member called the rec center on Wednesday to warn there were problems at the school that day, and rec center staff knew that meant they “should lock their doors to prevent trouble from the school from spilling over into the rec center.” The rec center is across the street from the school at Lexington Parkway and Marshall Avenue.

Witnesses reported “a big group of students” left Central and went to the rec center. There was a fight among girls at the rec center, which led Binford to come out and tell the students to leave. No one was allowed in the rec center because of the fight.

Students remained in the parking lot and talked. A girl got permission from an employee to let her male relative into the rec center, but “Binford was upset because another employee undermined his authority,” the complaint said. He cursed at her.

Binford later told police he “had words” with the girl who let her relative into the building.

“Binford explained to the girl she had to understand the rec center’s rules,” the complaint said. “Binford got fed up, clocked out, and left the building. Binford heard the girl talking about him to her friends as he was leaving. Binford told the girl to shut the (expletive) up. The girl stepped up to Binford and told him not to talk to her like that.”

The 16-year-old — referred to in the complaint by his initials of JT — intervened. A girl who joined in the fight described it as “pretty physical,” saying JT and another 16-year-old, identified as RC, grabbed and punched Binford. She said “it only lasted a couple of seconds. As soon as the physical fight ended, Binford backed up, pulled out his gun, and shot JT right in the head ” the complaint continued

One person told police that Binford “cussed at kids” and JT got into an argument with him. The person heard Binford say, “If I got to kill somebody I will.”

Police were called about the shooting around 4:15 p.m. Wednesday.

Statement after arrest

Binford said he didn’t know if anyone had been injured when he left the area. [He was arrested](#) about 5 p.m. Wednesday in the 1600 block of Stillwater Avenue on St. Paul’s Greater East Side.

He told investigators that JT thought he was reaching for a gun, but he was just looking for his bus pass. He said JT dared him to shoot him.

“JT told RC to call someone to bring all the sticks,” the complaint continued of what Binford told police. “Binford didn’t know what JT meant but he thought it probably meant to bring weapons.”

Binford said he walked away to catch his bus, and told JT and RC “that if they wanted to do something to him he would be at the bus stop.”

“Binford said he felt threatened because of JT and RC’s past behavior,” the complaint continued. “As Binford walked away, RC got into his way. Binford gave RC a ‘baby shove’ to create space. RC and JT ran up and jumped him. Binford ended up on the ground, but he was able to flip JT, and Binford threw a couple of punches at RC. Binford’s jacket was being pulled over his head. Binford said, ‘I ain’t gonna lie — I pulled my pistol.’ ... Binford added, ‘I just felt like if you wouldn’t put your hands on me this wouldn’t happen you know what I’m saying.’”

When Binford fired his gun once, there was a car between him and the teens and he estimated he was 10 to 15 yards away from them.

He also told police “he could have done something differently.”

“Binford said he wouldn’t have shot JT if they hadn’t put hands on him,” the complaint said. “Binford said they made his job hard, and he just wanted to come to work every day. Binford said it was not intentional — he didn’t come to work with the intent to harm someone — Binford said he knew he could

Police noted Binford's lip was "busted" and he had "visible injuries to his right upper eyebrow area."

Binford had a permit to carry a firearm. JT and RC were unarmed.

Bail argued

The Ramsey County attorney's office asked for Binford's bail to be set at \$1 million.

"These allegations are extremely concerning," Assistant Ramsey County Attorney Isabella Williams said in court Friday. Binford's actions appeared to happen "out of nowhere and simply because he was upset," she said.

Elizabeth Switzer, the attorney representing Binford Friday, said \$1 million bail is usually the amount that prosecutors seek in a homicide.

"I see this request as one that (prosecutors are) making to make a statement" because there is widespread interest in the case, she said.

Switzer also said the facts aren't as clear cut as what Williams indicated and that Binford denies saying information that was in the complaint.

St. Paul Mayor Melvin Carter, second left, speaks at a news conference at the Hallie Q. Brown Community Center in St. Paul on Thursday, Jan. 19, 2022. Carter addressed questions about the shooting of a 16-year-old boy by a St. Paul Parks and Recreation employee outside the Oxford Community Center/Jimmy Lee Recreation Center Wednesday afternoon. St. Paul Police Chief Axel Henry is at right and to Carter's left is Deputy Mayor Jamie Tincher. (John Autey / Pioneer Press)

Binford has worked for the city on and off since 2013 in several different roles, the [Mayor Melvin Carter said Thursday](#). His most recent title has been community recreation specialist at Oxford Rec Center. He started working there in August as part of a promotion after he worked at Arlington Rec Center for the previous four years.

He had a second job working for DoorDash. He's been working since he was 17, and has been living with his mother and younger sister.

"He's essentially the man of the family and so he works two jobs, graduated high school and really has just tried to make his life, his family's life and the community's life better" Switzer said " I think we read on a daily basis about

Ramsey County District Court Judge Andrew Gordon set Binford's bail at \$500,000.

"I can only imagine that you looked around and thought it's you against them," Gordon said to Binford. But he said that based on the allegations in the complaint, "I have to believe that ... there was a different way to respond."

Oxford Community Center has been closed since the shooting and, although it had tentatively been scheduled to reopen Tuesday afternoon, those plans changed over the weekend.

"To allow our staff and community members time to process this traumatic event, Oxford Community Center will remain closed until further notice," a statement from St. Paul Parks and Recreation announced late Sunday afternoon. "Updates will be shared on our website at www.stpaul.gov/oxfordcc. Thank you for your patience and understanding during this difficult time. We look forward to welcoming you back into Oxford Community Center soon."

Binford told police he carried his gun at the rec center, but people didn't know. He said he carried "because he worked the graveyard shift at the rec center when it closed" at 9 p.m., the complaint said.

Under state law, private businesses or property owners can generally ban guns on their premises, including when someone has a permit to carry a gun, but government entities can't prohibit permit holders from carrying weapons in public spaces, including libraries and recreation centers. St. Paul is allowed to ban city employees from carrying guns at work, but only when they're on the clock and on work premises, not parking lots.

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