

SPECIAL REPORT

Honors, pressures became too

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Just hours before his suicide, Brock had agreed after much reluctance to join other black employees at Volkswagen in suing the company for systematic racial discrimination at its plant near New Stanton.

He also had told family members the day before his death that a Volkswagen official had threatened to pursue sexual harassment charges filed against Brock by two white women employees if Brock joined the plaintiffs in the suit.

Grieving family members and friends said this week that it is too simplistic to blame Brock's suicide solely on his decision to join the suit or the sexual harassment charges.

In a broad sense, though, they speculate that those factors may have triggered an eruption of feelings Brock had buried deep inside himself.

"Most black people have that strain," said Joan Griffin, who worked closely with Brock in the Washington County NAACP.

"If you're fighting a battle so that anyone who is discriminated against is treated right, and yet you have a job in that world that is discriminating against blacks, you are suspect in the eyes of the people you care most about.

"The difference for Bill was that he was so sensitive and so sure he could solve any problem," she said. "His goals for himself were so high that the pressures he put on himself were very great."

Dennis Powell, a leading black insurance agent in Pittsburgh who has known Brock since they went to the University of Pittsburgh, said his first reaction to Brock's suicide was disbelief.

"I mean, he was so sure of himself," Powell said. "He had a tremendous ego — his ego was worse than mine, and that's pretty bad."

Powell theorized that his friend may have been driven into deep despair on Friday because his decision to join the suit meant he was in effect giving up his long effort to solve Volkswagen's racial problems from inside.

"He used to tell me that they [other blacks at Volkswagen] didn't appreciate him and the way he was trying to help them," Powell said. "He felt they were blaming the wrong person for their problems.

"But he also knew that the company didn't care [about equal op-

portunity]. He felt that anything Volkswagen did was because they had to."

Haisela Dorsey, one of Brock's sisters, said her brother had been getting conflicting and frustrating signals in the last week of his life from Volkswagen managers and fellow black employees.

On Monday, Jan. 3, she said, Brock told her that company officials had promised him they were ready to make "major provisions" to redress longstanding grievances of blacks about employment policies at the plant.

"He was very excited about that," she recalled, "and he suggested that they meet with the Black Caucus on Wednesday to discuss the issue."

Brock was spokesman for the caucus, which included several of the top-ranking blacks at Volkswagen.

On Tuesday, though, Dorsey said Brock was caught by surprise when

present and former black employees at the plant filed the discrimination suit against the company in U.S. District Court here.

When the Black Caucus and Volkswagen officials met on Wednesday, Dorsey said, Brock told her that the management was angry over the lawsuit and reneged on its previous agreement to make employment policy changes.

Brock's last contact with company officials came right after the caucus meeting.

He was called into the office of company attorney Dennis Wilt, she said, and was told that a pending sexual harassment charge against him was still being investigated, and a second charge had been filed.

Brock said he also was told that if he helped the plaintiffs in the suit in any way, the company would use the sexual harassment accusations against him, Dorsey said.

Company officials have denied



William Brock's wife, Renae, with her sons Ruben, left, and William Jr.

heavy for one VW worker

they tried to influence Brock regarding the suit. However, they have confirmed they told Brock he might receive a suspension or some other reprimand if the sexual harassment charges proved true, but that he would not lose his job over them.

After the meeting with Wilt, who could not be reached for comment, Brock was "very, very angry," Dorsey said, and denied the charges vehemently.

A high-ranking female employee at Volkswagen, who asked not to be identified, said she was told by knowledgeable officials at the plant that one harassment charge was made by a woman who claimed Brock had made "definite physical contact" with her in the plant.

"Personally, I know he was denying the situation to his family and friends," the woman said. "He looked rather distraught of late, and you could see pressure in his

personality.

"He enjoyed a high public image among the black community, and he didn't want that destroyed. Personally, I think he couldn't face the fact that it might've been exposed publicly."

Another female employee doubts the harassment accusations.

"A lot of those guys out there were always making some kind of smart remark [to women], but not him," said Caroline Cusaac Enoch, an hourly worker who was laid off last summer.

"He spoke to you and went about his business. He wasn't like the rest of them; he didn't treat us like dirt because he was salaried and we were hourly."

Whatever his fears were, Brock did not report for work on Thursday or Friday, according to Dorsey.

On his last day, he made several phone calls to friends in the morning from his home at 785 Duncan Ave., and then visited a bank in Washington to cancel a meeting he had planned that evening with a local NAACP official.

Instead, Brock went to another meeting at the law office of Robert O. Lampl in Pittsburgh, where he agreed to join the discrimination suit against Volkswagen. He also apparently wrote a note referring to the sexual harassment charges against him, but then threw it away on the advice of his attorneys.

The meeting broke up in the late afternoon, and Brock then headed for a restaurant, according to family members.

When he finally got home that evening, Dennis Powell said he was told that Brock was "rambling incoherently."

His wife, Renae, told him to go upstairs and she would talk with him after she took care of their three young children, who were playing downstairs, Powell said.

Brock climbed the stairs and later a shot rang out. Washington County coroner's officials found him in the bedroom, with a .38-caliber bullet wound above his right ear. He was taken to Washington Hospital and died there early Saturday morning.

The youngest of eight children of the late Richard and Rebecca Brock, he grew up on Schenley Avenue in Stanton Heights as the precocious and pampered baby of the family.

Brock went to Fort Pitt Elementary School and Peabody High School, where he graduated in the middle of his class as a "solid 'C' student."

He entered the University of Pittsburgh in the fall of 1969, and immediately pledged Kappa Alpha Psi, a mostly black fraternity.

In 1972, Brock dropped out of Pitt and married Renae, whom he had met there. They then joined the Black Muslims and moved to Washington, her home town.

According to a resume he wrote in Washington County, Brock over the next three years worked for the county community action agency, the state Human Relations Commission and as a fresh fish salesman.

In late 1975, he joined the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act agency in Washington County, and within six months, was named its chief administrator.

In that period, fellow workers say, his involvement with the Muslim faith began to fade, and had ended by the time of his employment with Volkswagen.

Brock came to Volkswagen's attention because the Washington County CETA office was helping to place black applicants at the plant near New Stanton, and he was hired by the automaker in the summer of 1977.

He was Volkswagen's first Equal Employment Opportunity officer, and he soon gained a reputation as a moderate — businesslike, poised, always trying to reach accommodation rather than spark confrontation.

Despite that tendency, black colleagues say he was eased out of that Equal Opportunity post in March 1978 after complaining about what he felt were discriminatory company practices.

After that he served as a production manager, and then became administrator of operational improvement programs, the job he held at the time of his death.

Powell feels that Brock may have been overwhelmed by one of the few situations for which he could not find a solution all by himself.

"I think maybe he made a move by signing the suit that he felt he had to do, but then he got in the car and thought, 'My God, what have I done?' Maybe then he realized he couldn't go back to VW on Monday with business as usual."



Darrell Sapp/Post-Gazette

at funeral Wednesday.