

# United States: Erica Garner, 27, died on December 30 — Fighter for Black Rights

Monday 22 January 2018, by [SHEPPARD Barry](#) (Date first published: 18 January 2018).

**Erica Garner, Black Lives Matter activist, and daughter of African American Eric Garner who was brutally murdered by New York City police in 2014, died on December 30. She was 27 years old.**

The proximate cause of death was a heart attack, extremely rare in one so young. The underlying cause was the trauma-induced stress (PTSD) she and her family suffered because of Eric's murder, the exoneration of the killer cops, and the callous way they were treated by the city authorities including Democratic Mayor Bill DeBlasio.

Erica was in the hospital for acute asthma, itself stress-related, when she had the heart attack.

Eric Garner was jumped by a gang of white cops on July 27, 2014 in the Staten Island borough of the city. His "crime" was that he was standing on a street corner allegedly selling individual cigarettes to earn a few dollars. The cops forced him to the ground, and one cop, Daniel Pantaleo, put Eric in a chokehold, and strangled him to death while the other cops held him down. He pleaded for his life, hoarsely whispering "I can't breathe." Emergency Medical Services (EMT) personnel stood by.

The whole incident was caught on a cell phone video by a bystander, Ramsey Ortega, and was aired on national TV. Ortega was later arrested by the cops in retaliation. Twenty-four-year-old Erica saw her father's murder on TV. She became an activist then and there.

On August 23, 2014, thousands marched in protest in Staten Island. Erica was there, and was interviewed on Democracy Now! "My dad was a loving man," she said, "he was a humble man, and he was a nice man .... He did whatever he could for anybody who came around him ...." "Seeing the videotape, I was traumatized. I was very, like, horrified. It was horrible. Just seeing my father die on national TV was just horrible. I've got to live with this forever."

In December 2014, a grand jury decided not to indict Pantaleo (and never even considered indicting the other cops), setting off a huge march that shut down parts of New York City and the Brooklyn Bridge. There were some 50 demonstrations in other cities in solidarity.

Erica was at the site of her father's death in Staten Island, and said, "This is the spot that EMS workers and police officers failed us New Yorkers, because they let an innocent man die, beg for his life, fight for his last breath. And now, I have to come here every time I feel sad.... I have to be his voice."

Kirsten West Savali, a journalist at *The Root*, wrote a recent piece after Erica's death titled "Erica Garner: 'I'm in The Fight Forever.'"

Savali said on Democracy Now, "I met Erica in 2016 at a Drug Policy Alliance gathering at Columbia University. And she was there making the connection between what was really a modern day

lynching of her father, the war on drugs, and the occupation of Black and Brown communities...."I wrote this piece because Erica was very resilient. She didn't let her grief stop her. She didn't let her rage make her immobile. She used it to lift her voice for a community of people. She was not afraid to stand alone.

"She was not afraid to not follow the trend, particularly of Black women who were supporting Hilary Clinton during the election. That was not something that was popular to do."

Erica supported Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primary against Clinton. "And then, when he was no longer in the race, she spoke about the political duopoly [Democrats and Republicans] and how you could not put your faith in either the Democratic Party or the Republican Party. So I think that's important," Savali said.

Erica and her family fought to get justice, filing a suit. Mayor De Blasio repeatedly fought the family, refusing to release Pantaleo's record of abuses. After the city made a settlement with the family, the Citizen Complaint Review Board leaked his record, which included 14 citizen complaints, including physical abuse in a vehicle stop in 2011 and in a stop-and-frisk event in 2012. "Stop-and-frisk was a policy of randomly accosting mainly Black and Brown young men without a warrant and searching them, part of systematic police harassment. Pantaleo's record has never been officially released, which could have been used in the Garner family's suit.

Pantaleo wasn't fired, and remains a paid member of the force today.

The Citizen Complaint Review Board is seeking to bring charges against Pantaleo and the other cops, but the Police Department is blocking the effort by using a technical ruse - refusing to provide a number to the case.

Although she remained a fighter, and didn't let her grief get in the way of her struggle, the trauma took its toll. In a January 2016 interview, she said,

"Mental health is very important. Families that are put in our position, Black families that are on public assistance that don't have the income to get [expensive] therapy - for the Black population, how are we supposed to cope if we don't have someone professionally to talk to. I'm trying to figure out how can I get past this barrier because this is trauma." My three-year-old niece hit a boy on the head with a book at school and said 'I'm angry the cops killed my grandfather.' She wasn't mad at the kid. But she's so young, and for her to say that, it hurts my heart. Now she's out of day care and she's got to talk to someone. We just need to take care of our mental health.... I'm constantly reading articles and doing the research on my dad's case. But I'm not taking care of me." During Erica Garner's funeral, Rev. Al Sharpton said, "[while they say] she died of a heart attack, no, her heart was attacked that day," referring to the day police killed her father. "The fallout from police violence is killing Black women like Erica Garner," wrote University of Texas professor Christen Smith in a recent article. "When we think of police lethality, we typically consider the immediate body count: the people that die from bullets and baton blows.... But these numbers do not reveal the slow death that Black women experience. The long-range trauma police brutality causes can be as deadly as a bullet. The pain of loss kills with heart attacks, strokes, depression and even anemia." In an interview, Smith said, "When I heard that Erica Garner had a heart attack, I was devastated ... primarily because I thought to myself, 'Oh my goodness, this is happening again ....

"So for me, police violence is like a nuclear bomb. The initial blast is only a fraction of what is to come. In the aftermath of a nuclear bomb, there is fallout. The trauma of police violence is like fallout, and it kills you slowly like the cancer that kills you because of fallout."

In an op-ed in the *New York Times* titled "How America Destroys Black Families", Kashana Cauley

wrote: “It is impossible to think of her death without thinking of her father’s death in 2014, the devastation their family must feel and the ways Black families have been destroyed throughout history” going back to slavery.

**Barry Sheppard**

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