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Alton Sterling: His Death, and the Aftermath

We hear so many stories like this. An African-American is acting “suspicious”, a cop feels “threatened” and shoots him, people protest and riot, the charges are dropped, and these events repeat in a seemingly never ending cycle with each new victim of police brutality. But what happened to Alton Sterling was different. It hurt so much more, and felt much more real. Not because I watched the protests over his death spiral out of control with my own eyes. Not because where he died was a five minute walk from where I once lived. It was because I knew Alton Sterling.

It would be extremely selfish of me to make this essay just about my own loss, because there are others who suffered more from the death of Alton Sterling than I could possibly imagine. Alton was a father, a son, a sibling, and a friend. Someone’s father is dead. A man had to bury his brother. A man had to bury his brother. Someone watched their friend die. Who am I to say that I hurt anywhere near as much as they did? To say I did would be disrespectful, but the simple memories I have of Alton makes it difficult to fathom that he’s actually gone.

Most people who stayed near Howell Park and Capitol knew Alton as “The CD Man”, that guy who sold CD’s and mixtapes of all genres in front of Triple S Food Mart, a neighborhood corner store. I’ll always remember his kind nature and genuine gold-toothed smile he gave me every time I walked to Triple S for some ice cream or a bag of chips, and that he always reminded me and every kid passing by to stay in school. When I got the news of his death, it didn’t feel real. I didn’t understand, and I’ll never understand, how anyone could want to hurt him.

The focus of Baton Rouge citizens changed almost instantly when news of Alton’s death got around. The popping of fireworks and hot dog grilling on July 4th were suddenly the road-blocking protests and citizen versus police brawls of July

5th. Just days later, five police officers were killed in a standoff involving a protestor, right on Airline Highway. With that, the generally unnoticed racial divide in Baton Rouge was cut deeper than ever before, and a new fear, or hatred, of police was founded in citizens. My family stayed indoors for most of July of 2016, out of fear of the police, and even out of fear of angry protestors. My parents are still skeptical every time I leave the house. This incident has made them more afraid of me being shot by law enforcement than of me being shot by a regular citizen. I could feel tension, even between strangers, when I did go out. It was as if unity no longer existed in Baton Rouge.

My overall experience with this event opened my eyes to the fact that people tend to respond to violence with more violence. This ineffective method used by protestors, and the law enforcement attempting to tame them, caused even more problems surrounding Alton's case. Some people attending protests, peacefully or non-peacefully, were assaulted by police, adding to the issue people were protesting about to begin with. Angry citizens harassed innocent police that had nothing to do with Alton's death. Imagine being attacked for your ethnicity, or for using your right to protest protected by the constitution. Imagine being attacked for doing your job, because of the actions of two other people. Watching this happen with my own eyes made me angry, because these types of issues should not even exist.

As weeks went by, I could see the fire for social justice in Baton Rouge slowly dying out. The protests started having less and less people. Alton Sterling's name and face weren't plastered on news outlet headlines anymore. And by the time we were preparing to return to school, the protests had pretty much ceased. At first I thought people stopped caring, but now I recently realized two things. People were simply tired. Tired of fighting for justice and asking no process. Tired of using their voices, and not being heard. Also, the cease of protests became known when The Great Flood occurred in August of 2016. This event opened the eyes of people angry over Alton's death to the fact that Baton Rouge was still one place with a variety of people, people who now needed help more than ever. Alton's death was not a main topic anymore. We had to put aside tensions and prejudice and come together to help one another, because when half the city was underwater, all we had was each other.

It is now April of 2017, nine months since Alton was killed. I can still feel my heart start pounding faster every time I pass by Triple S. His face is spray painted on the front of the store, and there is a huddle of teddy bears and flowers, laying in his honor. I feel that his story won't forgotten by those who were alive when it happened, and the generations to come should know what happened. If we do not know the most tragic events of history, and what could have prevented them, they will surely repeat themselves. What happened to Alton does not represent law enforcement as a whole, but it does represent what happens when people refuse to set aside racism, and judge people by their ethnicity, instead of their character. I hope that the city as a whole learned how prevalent prejudice is in here. I hope that Alton's family and friends can one day see the people who took him away punished. I hope that American society can reach a point where African Americans will never have to worry about being harassed for the color of their skin.