

Alton Sterling, June 14, 1979 – July 5, 2016, 37 years old

Alton Bertrell Sterling was born on June 14, 1979. He was raised, with his four cousins, by his aunt, Sandra Sterling, after his mother passed away when he was 10 years old. Alton attended Central High School in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. "He was a funny guy... he made everybody laugh" said his aunt. His cousin, Elliott Sterling, said "He had a hard life. He didn't have no mama, no daddy... He lived day-to-day based on what he made."

At the time of his death, Alton had been living at Living Waters Outreach Ministries, a transitional living centre. Though it was not required, Alton would cook for the other residents. "Whatever he cooked, he cooked enough for everybody" said Calvin Wilson, who lived there at the same time.

Asha Bennie, the manager at the transition house, said Alton visited with his five children often, and had recently taken one of his kids to Chuck E. Cheese to celebrate a birthday. Bennie, who found out about Alton's death through his probation officer, said she and his P.O. were both shocked that he had been killed in a police shooting. "He was one of the good ones" Bennie said. "I never had any complaints... He was trying to leave all that behind and do something better." A NOLA.com article continues:

Sterling was convicted of carrying an illegal weapon in 2011, and had been released from prison about six months before his death. Acquaintances and family members told journalists that he was working hard to avoid going back to prison, which would have meant more time away from his five children.

Family members and Bennie recoiled at news reports that focused on Sterling's previous convictions, which included a charge in 2000, when Sterling would have been 19, of unlawful carnal knowledge of a minor. That conviction labeled him a sex offender and made it difficult for Sterling to find housing or hold down a job, yet Bennie said Sterling had managed to find a part-time job as a cook and was supplementing his income with CD sales.

"What I'm really struggling with is everyone is wanting to pick on him about that," Bennie said of the media reports of his previous convictions. "They're missing the point that he's a man with children. He spends time with those kids. He was trying."

"He was really good at selling those CDs" his cousin Elliott recalled. "He couldn't make it in a regular job, but he could make it selling CDs. He could converse with everybody."

For several years, Alton sold CDs and DVDs outside of Triple S Food Mart, owned by Abdullah Muflahi, who he developed a friendship with. "He was a nice guy. He wasn't out here doing anything bad. He was always selling movies, minding his own business... He showed me a lot of love" Muflahi said. "He looked out for me. He was friendly, welcoming, the meaning of Southern hospitality. People know him as the CD man, but he was more than the music. He was really a great guy. I feel I was cheated in life. We were supposed to grow old together and go fishing. Now he's gone."

Mufleh Alatiyat, who worked at the store, said Alton often bought food or drinks for people and gave away CDs, and that Alton "helped a lot of people."

NBA player Glen Davis, who also grew up in Baton Rouge, said he had known "Big Alton" for years and sometimes gave him CDs to sell to help him make a living. "Great guy, big personality. CDs were his way to make income to support his family" Davis said. "Not a guy who would use violence at all."

Darrel Jupiter Jr., a friend of Alton's, said, "He was my life. My best friend... He introduced me to my wife." Jupiter had planned to meet up with Sterling on July 4th, but had rescheduled because he was busy. "I'll just talk to him tomorrow and bring him a plate," Jupiter said he remembered thinking. "That's when my wife came and told me he was dead."

On July 5, 2016, police officers Blane Salamoni and Howie Lake II responded to an anonymous report that a Black man in a red shirt was selling CDs and used a gun to threaten a man outside of the Triple S Food Mart. Alton was found to be carrying a gun after he was shot, but store owner Muflahi said Alton had only gotten it a few days previous, after another CD seller he knew had been robbed. Louisiana is an open-carry state. Muflahi also said that Alton was not the one causing the disturbance that led to the police being contacted.

Footage from the store's security cameras, as well as witness videos, showed that upon arrival, the two officers immediately began telling Alton to put his hands on a nearby car. Alton appeared confused in the video and said, "What I did, sir?" The officers grabbed Alton and attempted to pin him against a car.

Lake then used his taser on Alton and the officers tackled him to the ground. As both officers held Alton down on his back, Salamoni drew his weapon and held it to Alton's

head, yelling profanities and threatening to shoot him if he moved. In the video, Alton appeared completely pinned down by the two officers, unable to move.

Alton was shot seconds later as Salamoni fired 6 rounds, striking Alton in the chest and back. Witness video ended there as the witnesses took cover. Body cam footage showed Alton on the ground, apparently dead, with blood pooling on his chest. Salamoni was then heard panting, and his hands were seen holding his handgun. He called Alton a "stupid motherf-----" twice, as he went through Alton's pockets.

Alton Sterling was pronounced dead at the scene by paramedics.

According to witnesses, Alton never held a gun, put his hands near his pockets, or threatened the police officers. Sharida Sterling, one of Alton's cousins, said, "He would have never fought the police, he wouldn't have pulled a gun, he would have been too scared." Alton's right hand is not visible in the video footage, and investigators concluded that the evidence "simply cannot establish beyond a reasonable doubt the position of Sterling's right hand at the exact time of the shooting, a split-second later."

At a press conference the day after Alton Sterling's death, Quinyetta McMillon, mother of his eldest child Cameron, promised that she would not rest "until the adequate punishment is served to all parties involved," while Cameron sobbed at her side. A makeshift memorial for Alton was created outside of the Triple S Food Mart, with mourners leaving flowers, pictures, and a stuffed panda holding CDs.

Alton Sterling's death, along with Philando Castile's shooting by Minnesota police the next day, led to days of protests against police brutality throughout Baton Rouge and across the country.

In May 2017, the US Department of Justice announced that they would not file criminal charges against the officers as a result of their civil rights investigation. In March 2018, Louisiana's Attorney General, Jeff Landry, announced that the officers would not be charged at the state level either, saying they acted in a "reasonable and justifiable manner."

In June 2017, Police Chief Carl Dabadie resigned. Murphy Paul became the new Baton Rouge Police Chief in January 2018, and said in a statement:

"We are sorry Baton Rouge. I want to apologize to the family of Alton Sterling and also to his kids... We're sorry because [Salamoni] should have never been hired.

And while we obviously cannot change the past, it is clear that we must change the future, and I sincerely apologize for the actions of the past and the role that our profession has played in building barriers in communities of color in Baton Rouge.”

On March 20, 2018, Blane Salamoni was fired for violating use of force and temper policies, but was allowed to resign instead after appealing the decision. Howie Lake II was suspended for three days for losing his temper. Both officers had been on paid administrative leave since the shooting.

Leo Hamilton, an attorney for the Baton Rouge Police Department, said that Salamoni had a history of aggressive misconduct prior to Sterling's shooting. “What became apparent from all the evidence presented to the chief was that Mr. Salamoni had a propensity for acting outside of the standards established by the BRPD for command of temper and use of force” he said. According to Hamilton, another officer told their superior that if something weren't done about Salamoni, he could kill somebody.

In June 2021, Sterling’s family settled a lawsuit against the City of Baton Rouge for \$4.5 million. Lawyers representing the family said the settlement would benefit his five children and support “significant policy changes” in Baton Rouge policing. The lawyers said in a statement, "Our hope is that these policy changes, which focus on de-escalation, providing verbal warnings prior to using deadly force and prohibiting officers from both using chokeholds and firing into moving vehicles, will ensure that no other family has to endure the trauma and heartbreak that Mr. Sterling’s family went through and will create a better future going forward for Baton Rouge residents.”

In loving memory of Alton Bertrell Sterling.

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