

Eric Garner, Sept 15, 1970 – July 17, 2014, 44 years old

Eric Bernard Garner was born on September 15, 1970, in New York to Gwen Carr. Eric, or “Big E,” was described as a gentle giant. His mother said of him:

*“He was my first born. He had a wonderful personality. He was a husband, a father, and a friend. He was educated, loved his family, adored his mother, loved by all that knew him. He had a special connection with the Christmas season. He would go above and beyond to help someone if he thought they were his friend or just anyone on the street if he saw they needed help.”*

Eric Garner married Esaw Snipes-Garner in 1989, becoming a father to her two daughters, and then to four biological children. In an interview with BET, Snipes-Garner described him as a good father who supported her in decisions and loved to spoil all of his children. She continued:

*“[He was] a character... He was very funny. He loved to make people laugh. He was very intelligent. He was a whiz in math. He could do math in his head like 1-2-3. When we were at the grocery store I would ask him, ‘How much do we have to spend? And what might I need to put back?’ He would do the [prices] and taxes, this and that. He would even tell me if we had enough to go out afterwards.*

*He would give anyone the shirt off his back. There was a homeless guy on Staten Island and Eric would buy him a sandwich every day. Another time, Eric bought a young lady some groceries at the supermarket. He loved kids. He would buy every kid in the park an ice cream.”*

Eric’s daughter, Erica Garner, remembered her father as doting and caring, saying, “We had good talks. My dad didn’t say much, what he did say was very important. ...Stuff that stuck with me.”

As a young man, Eric graduated from Automotive High School in Brooklyn, then attended technical college for a year before becoming a mechanic. He found enjoyment and success in his career, including working as a diesel mechanic for Greyhound. However, as newer generations of vehicles were built to require computerized diagnostic tests, his skillset was no longer in demand. He later worked as a landscaper for New York Parks and Recreation before having to quit

due to health issues. Eric's health was poor - he had asthma, diabetes, and sleep apnea, and his mobility was limited. To supplement his income, he regularly sold "loosies"- single cigarettes from untaxed cigarette packs for 50 cents each on Staten Island's Bay Street, across from Tompkinsville Park. Due to steep increases in state taxes on cigarettes, "loosies" had become an in-demand street vendor product in New York, drawing police attention. Over the years, Eric had been arrested for selling untaxed cigarettes multiple times.

Staten Island was already known for having the highest number of sued police officers in New York City. In an interview with National Public Radio, David Rankin, a New York City-based criminal defense attorney, who litigates federal civil rights cases against the NYPD, shared:

*"The amount of violence that our office has encountered from police in Staten Island for our clients, and the way that the underclass in Staten Island is policed is a magnitude different than the rest of the city - not to say that the rest of the city is in any way appropriate, but what we see out of [Precinct] 120 is miraculous. It's a step beyond... The PD moves their problem officers there."*

On July 17, 2014, at approximately 3:30pm, the police arrived at 202 Bay Street, Tompkinsville, Staten Island, due to a fight, which Eric helped to break up. Plain-clothes officers Daniel Pantaleo and Justin D'Amico approached Eric and tried to place him under arrest for selling cigarettes. The video taken by bystander Ramsey Orta begins as Eric responds to D'Amico, insisting he hadn't been doing anything. Eric pulled his hands away when Pantaleo tried to handcuff him, saying "Don't touch me, please." Pantaleo approached Eric from behind and put him in a chokehold - a move prohibited by NYPD regulations. D'Amico and three other uniformed officers joined Pantaleo in forcing Eric to the ground. After 15 seconds, Pantaleo released the chokehold and used his hands to push Eric's face into the sidewalk, as the other four officers continued to surround Eric and hold him down. Other uniformed officers observed and kept bystanders back, including Black NYPD sergeant Kizzy Adoni. Eric can be heard in the video saying "I can't breathe" over and over before eventually going limp. After he lost consciousness, officers rolled him onto his side, leaving him handcuffed and unresponsive on the ground. When the ambulance arrived, Eric was placed on a stretcher and taken to Richmond University Medical Center. According to the NYPD, Eric went into cardiac arrest during transport and was pronounced dead at the hospital an hour later.

The night after he filmed Eric's death, Ramsey Orta reported a police car drove past his home and shone a spotlight through his window. Orta later filed a lawsuit, alleging that NYPD officers arrested him multiple times in retaliation for filming the video. Taisha Allen, who took a lesser-known video of the incident, also filed a lawsuit alleging she was thrown against a fence, pushed to the ground, and dragged several feet before being arrested by police who called her, "that bitch that filmed the Eric Garner video."

Protests began in New York and other cities after Eric's death, with protesters chanting "I can't breathe." On August 1, 2014, Dr. Floriana Persechino, a New York City senior medical examiner, determined Eric's death was a homicide caused by neck compressions from a chokehold. On August 23, 2014, over 2500 people marched on Staten Island to protest Eric's death at the hands of police.

On December 3, 2014, a grand jury chose not to indict Pantaleo, saying they found "no reasonable cause" to bring charges against him. More protests occurred, including a group of over 3000 that gathered in Times Square, stopping traffic and shouting at police, "Who do you protect?" U.S. Attorney General, Eric Holder, announced a federal civil rights investigation would be conducted.

In December 2014, the NYPD began a 35 million dollar training program for officers in response to Eric's death, emphasizing cultural sensitivity, de-escalation, and improved communication between officers and citizens. A review of 2000 surveys completed after the training showed the majority of officers gave it negative reviews, and many felt it was "a waste of time."

On July 13, 2015, Eric's family settled a lawsuit against the city of New York for \$5.9 million.

In March 2017, an unidentified whistleblower from the Civilian Complaint Review Board revealed documents that showed, over the course of his career, Pantaleo had at least seven complaints made against him including 14 allegations. However, Pantaleo's punishment was mild: extra training and the loss of two vacation days.

On July 16, 2019, one day before the fifth anniversary of Eric's death, federal prosecutors announced they would not bring charges against Pantaleo.

In August 2019, Daniel Pantaleo was fired as the result of an NYPD disciplinary trial regarding Eric's death.

During a judicial inquiry in October 2021, Justin D'Amico, who was Pantaleo's partner on the day Eric was killed, admitted he "made mistakes" in the paperwork he filed regarding the incident, wrongly charging Eric with a felony (which requires the possession of at least 10,000 cigarettes) when he was only found with four sealed packs of cigarettes and one open pack with 15 inside. D'Amico also wrote in his incident report that no physical force was used in Eric's arrest, and testified that he did not hear Eric say he couldn't breathe a single time. D'Amico was not punished for logging the false charge.

On July 17, 2022, the street that Eric was killed on was renamed *Eric Garner Way*.

In loving memory of Eric Bernard Garner.

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