IN MEMORIAM

Over the past five years, police have killed more than two dozen Black Washingtonians. One was shot six times. Another was pinned to the ground, crushed under an officer’s knee. None of their deaths garnered the attention of Breonna Taylor, Michael Brown, or George Floyd. And yet—police killings of African Americans in Washington go back decades, brutalizing those left behind, who have searched for answers they suspect would have come easily to white residents. Today, though, amid a national reckoning around police violence, some of these loved ones have renewed hope that even as they’ve had to relive their personal traumas, this time it may not be in vain. Here, seven families spotlight the lives they lost and their quests for justice.

BY MARISA M. KASHINO

ARCHIE “ARTIE” ELLIOTT III

December 8, 1968–June 18, 1993
Age: 24
Manner of Death: Shot 14 times while handcuffed and seat-belted

ARCHIE ELLIOTT was driving home from his construction job when a District Heights police officer named Jason Leavitt pulled him over. According to media reports and court records, Elliott failed sobriety tests and admitted he’d been drinking. Leavitt handcuffed him and called for backup. A Prince George’s County officer, Wayne Cheney, arrived. They strapped Elliott into the front seat of a cruiser. The officers said they were talking by the passenger side when Elliott pointed a handgun at them from behind the closed window. Leavitt alleged that Elliott didn’t comply when he ordered him to drop the weapon. The officers fired 22 rounds, hitting Elliott 14 times.

An internal police investigation exonerated both officers, and a grand jury determined that there wasn’t enough evidence of wrongdoing to criminally indict them. Yet Dorothy Copp Elliott, Artie’s mother, is haunted by questions: How is it possible that Leavitt didn’t find the gun on her son—who wasn’t wearing a shirt—when he searched Artie? How did Artie manage to retrieve the weapon and point it while drunk and handcuffed?

The family filed a federal excessive-force lawsuit that was ultimately dismissed when an appeals court determined that Elliott had threatened officers, and thus deadly force was justified. Elliott and her ex-husband, who was then a state judge in Virginia, tried to appeal to the US Supreme Court, which refused the case. So Elliott protested. For 22 consecutive Wednesdays, she and other demonstrators blocked access to the Upper Marlboro courthouse. Once, Martin Luther King III, the civil-rights leader’s eldest son, showed up to take part.

Elliott, a teacher turned real-estate agent, wonders what would have happened if her son had been stopped in the age of cell-phone video. Even so, she’s feeling more encouraged than she has in a long while. After the police killing of George Floyd, an old MoveOn.org petition to get Artie’s case reexamined gained new traction. The State’s Attorney has agreed to review whether the case should be reopened.

“My son wasn’t a statistic—he lived for 24 years,” says Elliott. “I can just imagine what his future might have been like, his getting married and having children. He was going to build me a house.”

WASHINGTONIAN

September 2020
D'Quan Young

68

D'Quan Young and aunt of Young, mother and Michelle Catherine

OCTOBER 14, 1993–MAY 9, 2018

Department has said that Young con-

off-duty cop. The Metropolitan Police

Northeast DC. His killer was an

Brentwood Recreation Center in

returned to work. (He subsequently

been acting in self-defense. The officer

couldn't prove that the officer hadn't

declined to press charges, saying they

Young was shot five times. Prosecutors

have not determined who fired first.

tation escalated to a firefight. Police

to a party nearby, and the confron-

tioned the officer, who was on his way

outside the

D'QUAN YOUNG DIED

WASHINGTONIAN

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reviewed, but she was denied. In

video that prosecutors said they'd

a public-records request asking for

ning away at some point. Young filed

from the back, suggesting he was run-

According to his autopsy report,

Young, a clerk at DC Superior Court.

street. "It was just a nightmare, " says

D'Quan's mother, Catherine Young,

saw police tape strung everywhere,

D'Quan's body was already gone. She

of the shooting reached her, but

had sped to the rec center when word

24

AGE:

D'QUAN YOUNG

SHOT FIVE TIMES

MANNER OF DEATH:

SEPTEMBER 8, 1995–JUNE 12, 2018

22

AGE:

MARQUEESE ALSTON

SHOT AT LEAST SIX TIMES

MANNER OF DEATH:

MARQUEESE ALSTON

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SEPTEMBER 2020 SEPTEMBER 2020

For the first time, the US Attorney’s Office for DC had

or what took place leading up to his

viewer can't clearly see Marqueese

image of Marqueese running with an

killing. Before the city published the

footage shows police running

Alston and her lawyers at George-

pointed at the ground.

was hit in the head, back of the arm,

he was shot six times—indicates he

was hit in the head, back of the arm,

shot him, they "[hauled] him across

her theory that Marqueese wasn't

actually armed and that after police

'Justice, " Alston says, "would be

wrongful-death lawsuit laying out

troubling questions.

town Law’s Civil Rights Clinic con-

in the first place? Why did they shoot

them so many times?

underwent a near-death experience

with police in 1999. He spent years

in a federal prison, but he now lives

a tranquil life with his wife and three

young daughters. "Justice was done," he

in 2017. "We found a gun," Bowser

released it in August. The

delays in making the footage public,

because officials had "no clear

view of what occurred," Bowser had

refused to release it. "I don't know what

the police were thinking," Bowser said.

But by early 2019, both the MPD and

its refusal to release it and a new

Alston, Marqueese's mother, has

pressed to see the body-camera

the officers.

decided not to take action against

the city's refusal to release it and a new

officers.

decided not to take action against

the city's refusal to release it and a new

officers.

decided not to take action against

the city's refusal to release it and a new

TERRENCE STERLING, AN HVAC repairman, was on his motorcycle on U Street around 4:20 am when police saw him driving at "dangerous speeds—sometimes estimated at 100 miles per hour or more," according to a statement from the US Attorney's Office for DC. Police pursued him, then caught up at Third and M streets, Northwest, and blocked his path. MPD officer Brian Trainer tried to get out of the car, when Sterling "revved his motorcycle, accelerated toward Trainer, and crashed into the cruiser. Trainer fired two rounds into Sterling's right side and neck. A toxicology report later showed that Sterling's blood alcohol level was twice the legal limit. He was unarmed.

Footage of the shooting doesn't exist—in violation of MPD policy, Trainer, a white four-year veteran of the agency, didn't turn on his body camera until Sterling was already on the ground, dying. After nearly a yearlong investigation, prosecutors determined there was insufficient evidence to charge Trainer for the killing. But the MPD's internal investigation found that its officer violated use-of-deadly-force protocols: Trainer's life was not in danger, the agency concluded, thus the shooting was not justified. The investigation found that Sterling had been trying to maneuver his motorcycle around the cruiser, not intentionally collide with it. Trainer was subsequently fired, and the city settled a wrongful-death suit filed by Sterling's family for $3.5 million.

"Not only do I have to live without him, I have to live with the fact that the person who killed him is free," says Shanita Stagg, 37, a MedStar office supervisor and Sterling's girlfriend of more than a year. She went to Trainer's administrative hearing—a proceeding that was part of his firing. But she got little satisfaction watching the city make its case for terminating the officer. "It wasn't enough," she says. "Terrence will never come back."

ALONZO SMITH WAS a teacher's aide at Accotink Academy, a Virginia school for children with special needs, and planning to return to college for a degree in social work. His last Facebook photo was of himself in a classroom, captioned: "I'm all in for these kids." Two days later, authorities said, Smith was seen around 3:30 am running shirtless and shoeless at a Southeast DC apartment complex, yelling for help. Police stopped him in a stairwell. The officers were "special police"—contractors who are licensed to make arrests and, in many cases, carry guns but who aren't subject to the same oversight as Metropolitan Police Department officers. The officers shackled Smith, and one pushed a knee into his back, according to body-camera footage of MPD personnel who arrived on the scene. Smith soon stopped breathing, and he died shortly after arriving at the hospital. His mother, Beverly Smith, who lives a few minutes from where Alonzo was killed, says the MPD didn't notify her for another 36 hours. More agonizing still, they shared little about what happened.

The medical examiner found cocaine in Alonzo's system and determined that body compressions had contributed to cardiac failure. His death was ruled a homicide. But the US Attorney's Office for DC concluded it couldn't prove that the special police had criminal intent or used excessive force. They weren't charged or publicly named.

Smith became an activist, pushing for more local restrictions on special police, of whom there are thousands in DC. She hasn't been able to watch the video of George Floyd dying under an officer's knee, like her only son. "I often wonder: What were my son's last words? Did he cry out for me, too?" Smith says.
ON THE LAST night of his life, Gary Hopkins Jr., a student at Prince George's Community College, went to a dance at the West Lanham fire station, wearing his late father's lizard-skin shoes. At the end of the evening, a fight broke out. According to Prince George's County police, a tipster told them that someone in the car containing Hopkins and his friends had a gun—which was not true. Hopkins's group got into a confrontation with police. One officer drew his gun and, according to witnesses, held it to Hopkins's head. At least nine witnesses said Hopkins put his hands up. Police said he grabbed the gun. A second officer, Brian Catlett, fired a fatal round into Hopkins's chest.

In 2001, Catlett was put on trial for involuntary manslaughter and reckless endangerment. He waived his right to a jury, opting for a bench trial instead. A judge acquitted him, saying a defense expert convinced him that traces of Hopkins's DNA were found on the gun. Marion Gray-Hopkins, Gary's mother, lost her son two weeks after her husband died of bone cancer. Twenty years later, she laments how "naive" she was at the time. The couple had raised their four kids in a middle-class neighborhood in Lanham, where they'd never previously feared police. She was an executive at Bank of America. But within a year of her son's death, she was also an activist. By 2015, she had cofounded an anti-violence organization, the Coalition of Concerned Mothers. She also sits on the board of the ACLU of Maryland. "This is bigger than Gary," she says, "and it's bigger than any of these high-profile cases that you've seen. We're talking about systemic racism and white supremacy."

"The day my husband died, he said, 'You know, you're a soldier.' That morning before my son died, he said 'Dad was right—you're such a soldier,' " Gray-Hopkins says. "I have to be a soldier, because they said I was."

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