

## **Black women unnamed': how Tanisha Anderson's bad day turned into her last**

Anderson died during an encounter with Cleveland police as her family, who had called 911 seeking help, watched from their home. Like many of the 23 women killed by police this year, her story has been 'erased' from the spotlight

Tanisha Anderson's family can't help but think about her every time they walk down the street outside her house, because that's where police restrained her shortly before she died, not far from the tall tree in the front yard.

One of the many dreadful consequences of killings at home is that families must bear witness, to the body of a mother's daughter, a brother's sister, laying in the middle of the road with her nightgown hiked up around her hips.

The family of Anderson, 37, was watching from her rambling Victorian family house in east Cleveland when she was taken into custody last November and, they say, slammed onto the pavement and handcuffed. At some point during the fatal police encounter – one of the many overlooked cases of women killed by police – she stopped breathing. Anderson was dead by the time she arrived at the hospital.

The coroner ruled Anderson's death a homicide, but prosecutors have yet to announce whether charges will be brought. The officers' individual answers to a civil complaint by the family are due to a court on Saturday, but the Andersons say they know what they saw.

"It's still kind of hard some days to even go outside and walk and hit that corner and know what happened," said Theresa Anderson, the partner of Tanisha's brother Joell, who said in the immediate aftermath that the police "killed my sister" as he watched.

Lawyers for the family said even Anderson's 16-year-old daughter, Mauvion, watched from a window as her mother died outside the home where they lived with Tanisha's mother, Cassandra.

Seven of the 22 women killed by police in the US since the start of this year were killed at home, according to data collected by The Counted, the Guardian's project to track every police killing throughout 2015.

In a lengthy interview with Anderson's family, they told the Guardian that Tanisha was so much more than the "mentally ill woman" described in some news reports about her death, and that the night she died was the first time in years they needed to call 911 for help on Tanisha's behalf.

For much of her life, the family said, Anderson had been a good student who dreamed of becoming a broadcast journalist. In her 20s, she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and placed on medication.

On 13 November, a cold night in Cleveland, her younger sister Jennifer said Tanisha was having one of her "bad days". Wearing only in a nightgown, with no shoes on, Tanisha was disoriented and kept trying to leave the house. Joell Anderson – who as a child had been his two sisters'

appointed protector, walking them to school every day, warning them off strangers – was the one who made the first 911 call.

Two sets of police officers arrived instead of an ambulance. Anderson seemed calmer for a time, but then the family called again. The second set of cops, they claim, were ruder and more brusque. They were Detective Scott Aldridge, a seven-year veteran of the force, and his partner Brian Meyers. They told the family to stay in the house and walked Anderson to their patrol car.

The story of what happened next is chaotic, disputed, and the subject of the family’s lawsuit – as well as an ongoing investigation by the Cuyahoga County prosecutor’s office, which this week also received a police investigation into the death of 12-year-old Tamir Rice, who was killed while carrying a toy pellet gun by the Cleveland police force, one of the most scrutinized in the US.

But everyone agrees on a few facts: within half an hour of the second police visit, Tanisha Anderson was lying on the pavement, handcuffed and not breathing. She arrived at the hospital, the coroner’s report says, in full cardiopulmonary arrest and could not be revived. Her death, the coroner would rule, was a homicide, with the cause listed as “sudden death in association with physical restraint in a prone position in association with ischemic heart disease and bipolar disorder with agitation”.

### **The ‘erasure’ of women killed by police**

Anderson’s story made some national headlines in the US, and it has been covered extensively in the local Cleveland press. But her name has never become a rallying cry in the same way as Freddie Gray, Michael Brown or Trayvon Martin.

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Rice was killed just 10 days after Anderson died, and his story, with its videotaped encounter, immediately eclipsed hers in the public consciousness. At a recent “justice and reform revival” held at a local church, with a keynote appearance by the Reverend Al Sharpton, her name was never mentioned.

Women’s stories, many in the #BlackLivesMatter movement point out, simply don’t garner the same kind of attention men’s do. Brittany Packnett, who sits on Barack Obama’s policing taskforce, told the Guardian: “We know the story of marginalized people, of repressed people in America, is often one of erasure. And when you talk about not only being a person of color but a woman on top of that, you can feel that erasure doubly.”

Some are seeking to rectify that, like the Columbia University law professor Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, who recently co-authored a report called #SayHerName: Resisting Police Brutality Against Women, for the African American Policy Forum. “The failure to highlight and demand accountability for the countless black women killed by police over the past two decades,” the

report observes, “leaves black women unnamed and thus under-protected in the face of their continued vulnerability to racialized police violence.”

A lawyer for Anderson’s family, David Malik, who has been involved in many Ohio cases involving police violence, told the Guardian that in his experience the erasure of those stories was typical. “I will tell you, I think the problem is male domination of police departments, of the media, of government,” he said. In newsrooms, he also said, “the combination of being a woman, being an African American, sometimes being poor, or sometimes having a police record means such individuals never even make it on the radar screen”.

At least seven of the 23 women killed by police in 2015 were African American like Tanisha; 12 were white, one Hispanic, and one Asian American. (The Guardian is still seeking confirmation of the race of the two other women killed.)

At least four of the women identified by the Guardian had documented mental health issues, as Tanisha Anderson did. But unlike Anderson, in almost all of the cases the cause of death was a gunshot. And almost all of the women were alleged to be armed with some kind of weapon: sometimes a gun, sometimes a knife, sometimes a vehicle. Anderson, everyone agrees, was unarmed.

At least two of the black women killed by police – Meagan Hockaday of Oxnard, California, and Janisha Fonville of Charlotte, North Carolina – died in the midst of domestic disturbance calls, where the police had been summoned to help.

### **Not just a diagnosis**

If they could tell the story of Anderson’s last night themselves, her family repeated in the interview at their home, it would sound a lot different from the police account. The manner of her death reduced Anderson to a set of diagnoses, but that was never what she was to them. They lost a beloved sister, daughter and friend with a generous streak, who was known for her quick mind and affectionate temper, who slept every night in a bed with the family pitbull, named Drama.

“She was much more than what they describe as being mentally ill,” Joell’s partner Theresa said. “She had bad days, but I have bad days, too,” Tanisha’s sister Jennifer insisted.

As a child, teachers liked her and she liked them back, her mother said. “Her IQ was supreme,” Joell Anderson said. Tanisha was a “straight-A student” who loved math, but her special talent was problem-solving. In high school she devised a slogan for the local iteration of the Drug Abuse Resistance Education project: “Don’t do drugs or they’ll do you.” It played on local television. By the time she began taking classes at Cleveland State University, she was hoping to get into broadcast journalism and her family thought she had a knack for reporting.

When the mental health problems surfaced, her mother remembers episodes beginning with intense anxiety; Tanisha would pace around a lot. She would flick the lights on and off. “I never had trouble getting Tanisha to the hospital,” at those times, Cassandra said. Tanisha was always aware of her surroundings and would simply agree to go. “She would always say, ‘Yes mom.’”

Still, years passed between hospitalizations and medication adjustments; much of the time Anderson was fully functional. For a period of about six years, as Tanisha was raising her

daughter Mauvion in her mother's home, she even ran a daycare there, with three shifts of about six children each. She taught the children their colors and numbers on flashcards. When the daycare finished, she settled into simply helping her mother with chores, focusing on raising her daughter and having late-night taco-making sessions with Theresa.

No one saw what was coming. "Even on that last day," Joell said, Anderson appeared mostly fine until the episode – and the encounter – began.

### **'He placed his weight on her'**

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The city of Cleveland and counsel for the two police officers declined to comment for this article, citing ongoing litigation. But on the night Anderson died, the Cleveland police department released a statement claiming the officers had handcuffed her because she was resisting them. They said that once in the car, she began kicking them.

"A short time later," the statement continued, "the woman stopped struggling and appeared to go limp."

That version of the story does not appear to account for the prone position, nor for the multiple abrasions and contusions the coroner found on Tanisha's body, nor for her fractured sternum.

One of the two officers was involved in a 2012 police chase of a couple through the streets of Cleveland that ended fatally in a hail of 137 bullets into the couple's car. A police officer, Michael Brelo, who had been charged with voluntary manslaughter over the incident, was found not guilty last month as Cleveland's police force came under increased federal scrutiny.

The family says in its civil lawsuit against the city and the officers that they watched and listened from the house as Tanisha, who was afraid of confined spaces, cried out for her mother and brother. They heard her recite the Lord's Prayer.

Then, the family alleges, the senior of the two officers, Detective Aldridge, "slammed her to the sidewalk and pushed her face into the pavement. He placed his knee onto her back, placed his weight on her and placed Tanisha in handcuffs."

The family says that Aldridge's partner, Brian Meyers, helped him hold her down.

After she stopped moving, the family claims, the police did not call an ambulance for some time and left Tanisha Anderson in the middle of the road.

In its reply to the lawsuit, the city concedes only that emergency medical services were not called until 45 minutes after the officers arrived, and that Anderson was handcuffed when the paramedics got there.

An investigation is pending against the two officers; as was the practice with Rice's investigation, it was first handled as a matter of internal discipline, then handed to the prosecutor's office. In an email to the Guardian, the office stated: "That's an ongoing investigation, and we have no comment."

As documents first obtained by the Northeast Ohio Media Group show, this is not the first time Detective Aldridge has been accused of misconduct on the job. He has been suspended twice during his seven years with the police force. One suspension was related to his part in the chase of Timothy Russell and Malissa Williams through the streets of Cleveland, the one that ended in a hail of 137 bullets and for which Brelo was acquitted of firing the last 15. (Aldridge never fired his weapon.)

The other suspension for an incident in January 2012, when Aldridge violated the police division's policy for Taser, use of force and ethics – after he witnessed a woman being tasered by another police officer and walked away, failing to call for any help for her.

### **Telling a story and saying her name**

While the legal process drags on, Cassandra Johnson has been working on recovering from the family ordeal. At first she didn't want to go to any of the Cleveland stores that she and Tanisha had long frequented. "It's just one day at a time," she said. "I'm not where I was ... but I'm not where I want to be either."

Cassandra mostly spends her days advocating for better training for police officers in dealing with the mentally ill, through projects like #SayHerName and others. At the end of May, she spoke at a rally in New York after the release of the #SayHerName report, along with the families of Rekia Boyd, Miriam Carey, Michelle Cusseaux, Shelly Frey and Kayla Moore.

"What happened to my daughter," Johnson said to the crowd, "was unjust. It was unjust. It was really unjust. I've been through all the range of emotions that I can go through, concerning this. But I will not stop, as all of the rest of the mothers have said, until I get some answers."

The family was encouraged by the consent decree recently imposed upon the Cleveland police in a settlement with the US Department of Justice. The additional training procedures outlined in the decree were the sort of reform they have been hoping for.

The other day, in her lawyer's office, Cassandra was clutching a copy of its mental health training provisions. Joell described the new measures as the "greatest joy".

"Like I tell my mom," Tanisha's sister Jennifer said, "my sister was going to school for journalism, to be a news broadcaster. She couldn't do what she wanted to do in this life, but she's doing it in another way in telling her story.

"She's not telling somebody else's. She's telling hers – she's using my mom's voice to speak her story. So that everyone knows who she is."

- This article was amended on 8 June 2015 to record that 23 women have been killed by police in 2015, not 22 as previously stated.