THE IMPACT OF FATAL STATE VIOLENCE
ON BLACK WOMEN AND WOMEN OF COLOR LEFT BEHIND

ARCHCITY DEFENDERS | JANUARY 2023
“There is a distinction I am beginning to make in my living between pain and suffering. Pain is an event, an experience that must be recognized, named and then used in some way in order for the experience to change, to be transformed into something else, strength or knowledge or action.

Suffering, on the other hand, is the nightmare reliving of unscrutinized and unmetabolized pain. When I live through pain without recognizing itself—consciously, I rob myself of the power that can come from using that pain, the power to fuel some movement beyond it.”

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## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?  

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
ArchCity Defenders (ACD) met Gina Torres in her home the day after her oldest son, Isaiah Hammett, was killed by St. Louis police. This was the same home police stormed in a “no-knock” raid, unleashing more than 90 rounds of bullets on her unsuspecting 21-year-old son. When we stepped inside those bullet-torn walls, we began to understand the devastating impact Isaiah’s death would have on Gina and her family.

After meeting with Gina, and as a result of ACD’s initiative to combat state violence through holistic legal advocacy, we have since been introduced to more people impacted by state-sanctioned violence, who are primarily Black women and women of color whose loved ones were killed by police or died in jail custody.

Their questions, concerns, and experiences led us to investigate the prevalence of fatal state violence, which culminated in our 2021 report, “Death by the State: Police Killings and Jail Deaths in St. Louis.” While our research findings and public data show that Black men experience higher rates of death by fatal state violence than any other demographic in the St. Louis Region, our work with numerous impacted families over the years has made it increasingly clear that survivors and those left behind, particularly Black women and women of color, also face a myriad of life-altering consequences.

After a loved one’s life is taken by the state, it is frequently and predominately women who are left to pick up the pieces, support their families, and lead the fight for justice for their loved ones. These women, particularly mothers and mother figures, shoulder great burdens in the aftermath of their loved one’s death. In hearing these struggles, we saw a need to shift the conversation around fatal state violence to center the experiences of women survivors.

“In Her Words” features excerpts from our interviews with Tammy Bufford, Toni Taylor, Gina Torres, Khorry Ramey, Wanda Parker, and Maria Miller—women, the majority of whom are Black or of color, whose loved ones were killed by police or died while incarcerated between 2013 and 2022.

While processing unimaginable pain and grief, and navigating changing family dynamics and roles, these women also face incessant harms inflicted by the state and, at times, the media. Through it all, they are leading and advocating. While these experiences are not linear or comprehensive, we have heard a number of recurring themes throughout our conversations.

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1 ACD defines the term fatal state violence as the instances in which state-sanctioned institutions and their respective actors, such as police and jail guards, become deadly.

2 While data show that men experience higher rates of death by fatal state violence, we recognize that state-sanctioned terror impacts women and those beyond the gender binary.
Women impacted by fatal state violence are often:

- Correcting false media narratives and reframing media narratives that were quick to vilify their loved ones.
- Facing many barriers to obtaining records, information, witness accounts, death certificates, and related documents from the state—even when working with investigators and attorneys—and filing litigation.
- Actively accompanying other impacted families and establishing communities of healing, grief support, and resources.
- Running foundations in their loved ones’ honor.
- Taking on public roles as advocates and activists.

Although each woman’s story is unique, their distrust of the police and carceral state; their media advocacy; and their desire for peace, closure, and justice comprise collective experiences that span nearly a decade and reach across the State of Missouri.

True to these themes, “In Her Words” concludes with a testimonial from Lexii Alexander, a Black transgender woman whose life has repeatedly been jeopardized while incarcerated in Missouri.

A core belief of ACD is that our fight for safety, wellness, and justice requires the abolition of the prison–industrial complex. As you will read, some of the surviving family members featured in these pages share that abolitionist vision. Others wish for the same criminal penalties for state actors that so many others have faced. In either case, our aim here is to share the trials and dreams of these women, in their words.

In uplifting the voices of these women, we hope to increase visibility and awareness of how Black women and women of color survivors, especially, are directly impacted by fatal state violence. The de-prioritization and exclusion of the experiences of Black women and women of color from the conversation about state violence is a choice that actively upholds the oppression, misogyny, and racism that has rendered Black women and their pain invisible throughout history. This publication offers readers a space to expand their realities to include those of women survivors, in order to combat the persistent erasure of Black women and women of color that pervades the cultural landscape of our society today.

3This publication includes portraits of seven women with whom we spoke, background information, and excerpts from our interviews. This publication accompanies the video and portrait exhibition “Bound by Blood” at The Luminary and viewable here.
Tammy is the mother of Cortez Bufford, a 24-year-old man shot and killed by officers from the SLMPD in December 2019.
“Enough is enough.”

TAMMY IS THE MOTHER OF CORTEZ BUFFORD. Cortez was the youngest of her five children, a fun-loving kid who always made her smile. On December 12, 2019, Cortez was shot and killed by the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department (SLMPD) at just 24 years old.

Cortez’s death was the culmination of years of experiences with state violence. In April 2014, St. Louis police officers pulled Cortez over, removed him from his vehicle, and proceeded to brutally beat him on the ground. The incident was partially recorded on a police car dashcam, before an officer turned the camera off. Cortez later settled a lawsuit against the police department, filed as a result of the incident.

According to Tammy, the police intentionally and vindictively harassed her son for years after the lawsuit. Then, over five years later, Cortez was chased, shot, and killed by SLMPD officer Lucas Roethlisberger.

Tammy’s world was shattered by Cortez’s death. Not only did she struggle to get answers about what happened to her son, but she dealt with the media attempting to skew the narrative in favor of the officer who killed him, all while trying to navigate her journey with grief and maintain the close-knit relationship she had with her family before losing Cortez, who was integral to their bond.

Despite the immense pain Tammy has endured, she continues to fight and advocate on behalf of her son and other families faced with similar, tragic loss. In 2021, Tammy became one of the first policy advocates with the Fatal State Violence Response Program, and she recently became a full-time abolition organizer at Action St. Louis. Over the years, she has spoken to the need for increased transparency for surviving families on the circumstances of their loved ones’ death, as well as reparations for those who have lost loved ones to police violence, and called upon elected officials to enact policy change. In 2022, as a result of Tammy and others’ advocacy with the FSV Response Program, the City codified policy calling for independent investigations (Board Bill 47) and prohibited no-knock warrants (Executive Order 71).

In our interview with Tammy, she shared her experience with fatal state violence as a surviving mother and the change she wants to see, in her own words.
Tammy: THE FIRST TIME THAT I FEARED FOR CORTEZ’S SAFETY was when he was walking home from a friend’s house and that friend was shot.

The police came to our house and instead of them trying to find out what happened to this young man, he asked Cortez, “Did you just move over here? Because we don’t know who you are?” Cortez had lived there his entire life and, at that time, he was 16 years old.

At that point, I started to fear for his life because instead of the officers saying that “we’re going to try to find out what happened,” he was more concerned that he didn’t know who Cortez was because he hadn’t been in trouble. And yet they treated him like a criminal in that moment rather than a 16 year old who had just witnessed the traumatic shooting of his friend.

In April of 2014, Cortez was pulled over by officers. He was pulled out of his vehicle and brutally beaten by eight police officers.

The officers were on dash cam, beating him. And then when other officers came up, they said, “Hey, you’re hot. If you’re worried about anything.” So then they turned the cameras off and continued to beat my son. Cortez then filed a lawsuit against them and won, and then after he won, he was told that he would have a target on his back.

Every opportunity that the police got, they stopped and harassed Cortez for anything just because he was there. I thought it was because of the car that he was driving so we bought him a new car. And then the officers found out that he had a new car and then they continued to stop him.

I feel like the officers are given way too much leeway in this instance. They don’t have to answer to anybody, they just act. And these officers are just human beings just like you and I and, instead of them showing compassion to Black men, they harass and threaten them. Cortez suffered years of harassment from the police before they killed him.

It has been very difficult for me to get details about what happened to Cortez.

The officer who murdered my son waited almost 30 days before he even gave a statement to the investigators of the Force [Investigation] Unit (FIU) to say what happened in the situation. I could never get any answers from anybody as to why my son was targeted that evening and why the officer felt like he had to kill him. Was it just because Cortez was standing on the side of the building and because he was Black that the officer drew his gun?
When Cortez ran down the street, the other officer in the SUV hit him with the SUV, and then Cortez fell to the ground. And he got up and was running and running for his life. So then he runs into a dark gangway. And then there’s nobody else in that dark gangway except for that officer. The officer claims that Cortez drew a gun at that point. But this gangway was pitch black. There was no light. The officer didn’t even have a flashlight.

We had an investigator go back and investigate the scene and, based on the timing, the lighting, the moonlight, there was no way that officer could see down that gangway. And yet, the officer claimed he feared for his life. But how do you fear for your life if you’re the aggressor? You’re the one that’s doing the chasing. If you feared, why not just stop? Call for backup?

But he chose to go into that gangway. I don’t even think he went all the way into the gangway before he started firing. He got to the mouth of the gangway and started firing because the markings show there was bullets at the mouth of the gangway and then right on top of Cortez’s body.

The media falsely reported the story.

Initially, the media said that a 27-year-old male drew a gun on police officers and officers returned fire. My son was 24 years old, not 27. The media also reported that someone else was his mother because they came to the scene and they were crying. That was my cousin, not me. I was there at the scene and yet they never approached me, asked me any questions, or anything. They just falsely reported what they thought or what they assumed.

After Cortez’s death, it was very difficult for me. I was angry with everybody, even God because I felt like, why did you allow him to be taken in this manner?

It took me a very long time before I was able to even talk to anybody about it or care for anybody or show any type of compassion because I was devastated. My life was turned upside down. I could not focus.

But then, after some time and some therapy, I was able to come to grips with it, try to manage the pain, and I found the Fatal State Violence [Response] Program, which is a community of people just like me who have lost loved ones. And in that act is showing people that we can come together. It’s a tragic reason why we have to come together but, for me, when it happened, I didn’t have anybody. So to be there for someone else, to show them that there are some people out here who are compassionate, who can help you out, who have your best interest at heart. Who will not try to use you or abuse you in your darkest time, your time of need. The program has allowed me to be able to help others in a way that I wasn’t helped.
In the Fatal State Violence Response Program, we go out and do “people’s investigations.” So when there’s a police-involved killing, we go out and try to gather information because, again, the media don’t always get the details right. And the police don’t always give us the details. They make their own narratives. So we go out and we try to get any information that we can from the public just to see things that may be overlooked.

We contact families to let them know that they’re not alone in this fight. If you need someone to support you, we’re here to support you and just direct them to resources because there’s no manual with this. And a lot of people don’t know where to turn, who to turn to. A lot of times there are people who [are] clout chasers or just want to get headlines, versus actually helping the families through this difficult time. So we are here to help them get through the difficult times.

I had to bury my son. Parents shouldn’t have to bury their children over senseless violence.

Children are supposed to bury their parents. So this is the most difficult thing I’ve ever had to encounter in my life, and I don’t wish this on anybody. I don’t want anybody to be in this club that I’m in where they have to bury their son because a police officer who took an oath to protect and serve the community decided that they would be judge, jury, and executioner.

For me, the support that I need from the community is for more people to stand up against the police and these injustices that are happening to everybody, to say “enough is enough,” to fight to get policies changed. Because the police system as it is is doing exactly what it was designed to do. Oppress Black people.

We need to make a change in the system so that officers are not able to continue to harass Black people just because they are Black.
Remembering Cortez Bufford

“This is a photograph collection of Cortez and the family. He really was the love of my life.”

“One of my favorite memories of Cortez was when he got his job at FedEx. He was really excited about that and really proud that he got the job straight out of high school. He worked there and at UPS at the same time. I remember him and I being very proud of his having gotten this really good job. It’s a fun memory for me.”

“Cortez was the baby of the family. His oldest sister is probably eight years older than him, and she has said that she was his second mom. She taught him and let him drive her car. Well, I don’t know about ‘taught him’ but let him drive her car. His death has been difficult for her because she lives across the street from us, and he would always stop by there before coming home. So, it’s strange, but we’re trying to deal with it and come together, bonding as a family.”

“I would like for my son Cortez to be remembered for being a fun-loving, caring soul who loved to be around people.”

“I really just want people to know that Cortez was a great kid. He loved life. He loved to have fun. He loved to make people smile. He was a joy to be around. And he didn’t meet anybody that was a stranger. He welcomed everybody. If he had it, you had it. He was generous, loving, and caring.”
IN HER WORDS
Toni Taylor

Toni Taylor is the mother of Cary T. Ball, Jr. On April 24, 2013, at age 25, Cary was shot by SLMPD after a high-speed chase.
TONI TAYLOR IS THE MOTHER OF CARY T. BALL, JR., and three other adult children. On April 24, 2013, at age 25, Cary was shot by SLMPD after a high-speed chase.

The night of Cary’s death, bystanders said they witnessed Cary crash his car, limp out, and kneel on the ground with his hands up in surrender. Onlooking residents claim that they fully expected police officers to arrest him at that point. Instead, police fired 25 shots into Cary’s body and executed him on the spot.

Cary’s death not only traumatized Toni and her family, but entire communities. Toni shares that, in the aftermath, she felt she was left without the support and guidance she needed to navigate such immense loss. At the same time, she was deeply hurt by the media’s vilification of her son. While dealing with overwhelming emotion and devastation on all fronts, her relationships with family and close friends have become deeply fractured.

Toni’s struggles navigating the death of her son spurred her to take up the fight for justice, to ensure that law enforcement face real consequences and to prevent other mothers and families from suffering through the same pain she did.

Today, Toni is a prominent and integral force in the fight against fatal state violence in the St. Louis Region. In 2017, she and her family started an organization that has since hosted several community give-back events: Cary on the Ball, Inc. In front of City Hall, Toni has demanded independent investigations of police killings, and she said she has met with several officials on the city, state, and local level to try to get funding for an independent investigation unit for police-involved shootings. As an FSV Crisis Responder and policy advocate, she works to support other families, particularly mothers, who have lost loved ones to fatal state violence by sharing resources, connections, and information that has been helpful to her since losing Cary.

In 2022, as a result of Toni and others’ advocacy with the FSV Response Program, the City codified policy calling for independent investigations (Board Bill 47) and prohibited no-knock warrants (Executive Order 71).
**Toni:** CARY WAS CHASED BEFORE THE ACTUAL SHOOTING. All the witnesses say that Cary had surrendered and that the police could have, well, just arrested him. But instead, he was shot right in front of them. That traumatized their entire community.

It was children outside that evening that [saw] what happened. Back then they were six and nine years old. The six year old was urinating on herself every time she [saw] a police officer after. They didn’t only traumatize our family, they traumatized their entire community because there were so many people outside that night.

After the death of Cary, it definitely shifted our family. A lot of the time, I don’t even feel like I have a whole family no more.

I don’t talk to everybody in my family no more. I think everybody’s priorities just went in a different way. Me and my other kids, we’re not as close as we used to be. I don’t know. It’s just been hard. It’s been very hard. I’m not even as close as I was with his father. And we was childhood friends ever since I was nine years old. It definitely has shifted our relationships.

There was no media attention at first in Cary’s story. They mentioned it one time on the news, “25-year-old police-involved shooting,” showed his car, and that was it.

As we started to rally and protest and spread awareness of what happened to Cary, media came out. But it was never the point of view from the family’s side, it was more the police narrative. When this type of thing happens to your loved one, the media immediately goes to attacking their character.

The fight for justice is led by women in my opinion because we birthed them, so we feel their pain.

Cary’s death has impacted me to be able to care for others more compassionately because when this first happened to me, no mothers or fathers reached out to give me a little guidance. So that’s been a very big thing for me to advocate, not just for my child, but to advocate for other families that’s been impacted as well. To try to help them with some bereavement support groups and get them to mothers’ retreats. All of that has helped me in the past. So to just let them be introduced to one another through that, that helps me.

The future that I dream of looks like some police officers here in St. Louis City, as well as around the world, being held accountable, facing real criminal charges for what they have done to our loved ones. The future to me is justice for all and our communities being safe and feeling safe and protected by the ones that are supposed to protect and serve us the right way.
“I want people to remember that Cary was a human and that he was loved.”

“I believe my favorite memory of Cary was our one-on-one talks because I have four children and all of them like their individual time. [His girlfriend] told me that one day, he was with his friends and they were running late or something and he started fussing at them like, ‘Y’all better hurry up. I’m trying to get home and hang out with my mama before she go to sleep on me.’ So I’m glad that he enjoyed our talks too.”

“I wish I could’ve known what he was going to grow up to really be because he was going to school, majoring in human services. He wanted to start his own organization, but he wanted to do ex-offenders and elderly abuse. And I just thought that was really special for a young man to worry about the elders being abused. You don’t find that much.”

“I would just like everyone to know that he was a very decent, intelligent young man. I loved him to death.”
Gina Torres is a Hispanic Puerto Rican woman and the mother of Isaiah Hammett. Isaiah was just 21 years old when he was killed on June 7, 2017, by SLMPD SWAT in a no-knock raid.
“They’re supposed to protect us, not kill us.”

GINA TORRES IS THE MOTHER OF ISAIAH HAMMETT and three other children. On June 7, 2017, Isaiah was home with his grandfather when the SWAT team of the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department executed a no-knock search warrant and opened fire, killing 21-year-old Isaiah after blasting more than 90 shots.

After Isaiah was killed, Gina and her family battled more than the tragic loss of their loved one. They disputed police accounts that suggested Isaiah was armed and returned fire, and struggled to get information and records from St. Louis City and SLMPD, such as Isaiah’s autopsy and access to her son’s body. This, in turn, made it impossible to plan funeral arrangements. The lack of transparency and support from the state exacerbated the unbearable pain of knowing that she would never hold her child again, and not knowing why.

In the wake of such profound loss, Gina has struggled to play the same role as a mother that she did prior to Isaiah’s death, and she is haunted by his absence daily. Even so, Gina has worked to keep her family together, and led and participated in vigils, marches, and actions in protest of fatal state violence. She speaks proudly and publicly about her beloved son, whose character was vilified in initial news media reporting.

As a crucial member of the FSV Response Program, Gina provides support to impacted families; has met with elected officials; and advocates for increased government transparency in instances of state violence, police accountability, and an end to no-knock raids. In 2022, as a result of Gina and others’ advocacy with the FSV Response Program, the City codified policy calling for independent investigations (Board Bill 47) and prohibited no-knock warrants (Executive Order 71).
Gina: ISAIAH’S TATTOO SAID “TIME HEALS” but, losing him, I will never heal. No one will. I’ll never get another picture of my son. I will never get another birthday [with] my son.

I want people to know that my son was the best son ever. He’s not the monster that they try to put out on the news when they killed my son. It is sad to say that my son, even when the police would harass people, he’d say they’re doing their job and he’d take up for the police. And that’s what kills me the most. Just don’t trust the police. Not only do they harm us, they kill their own kind.

[The police] didn’t come there for nothing but his body. They shot 93 shots, 24 on my son’s body, and he was laying down and they did it all in front of my father.

Isaiah was executed in a no-knock raid. My father watched it all. So my father has to live every day seeing that, seeing my son. I hear him cry in his sleep, scream in his sleep.

It was my worst nightmare. And every day I just want to wake up. I never got to go touch him or anything, to say my goodbyes or his brothers and sister, his two little brothers and sister, and my father. It tears me apart not being able to go in or touch or see my son, not being able to say my goodbye.

It impacted my relationship with my other children. [The officers] stole their mom from them. And I feel bad about it every day.

My kids try to be strong for me when I’m their mom and I’m supposed to protect my kids, but they miss out on their mom on holidays, birthdays, and what we used to do. We always loved family birthdays and my son Isaiah was a big part of that. With Thanksgiving cooking and all that, I’m just not the same. When it comes to holidays, I will just let my kids go to their dad’s house or something so they can still celebrate. I get them everything but I just, it’s not the same. I sometimes just want to be alone because holidays were my son’s favorite.

There’s a lot of rage, anger, and depression. And before I was always sweet, happy... I’m not none of that no more.

I know a lot of people support justice for my son. I have a lot of adopted kids that I fed when he came over, a lot of his friends. It hurt them bad. A lot of them are on medication. They want justice just as much as me and his little brothers and sisters and grandpa do. And that’s the worst part is that I can’t take their pain either. They stole me from them too.

It doesn’t matter what color you are, [the police are] just there to kill you
and to make up a lie and say that you had a gun. And they get away with it. I don’t want no other family going through the pain and heartache that I go through every day. Me and my family and my son’s friends. Being on the FSV Response team means a whole lot because if I can help another family and be there for them and help them out and show them ways to get things that I didn’t have when it happened to my son... it means a lot to me that I’m here to help them and anything that they need. They made us a family pretty much. We might not be blood but we’re united as one.

The future I dream of... My dream is of something being done to these [cops] and them paying for what they’ve done to our loved ones and them hearing our voices.

If we kill somebody or if they thought we killed somebody, we’re going to be behind bars fighting for our innocence, you know what I’m saying? We’re going to be behind bars. I want the same for the police. I want the same for them. Every time I see on the news that somebody else got killed by the police. It just brings me back to that nightmare, the day, that morning that I got that call. And never did I think it’d be in my own home. I know my son didn’t either.

They’re supposed to protect us, not kill us.

Remembering Isaiah Hammet

“My son was very intelligent and he was just a big kid. Look at that smile. It’s my baby, my firstborn that I carried. That’s my best friend. I’m sorry. It’s hard. His birthday’s this month and he would’ve been 27. But yeah, that’s one of my favorite pictures.”

“He got that tattoo on his arm. It’s pretty much for my mom because it took a lot out of him when my mom passed, and then he moved in with my father at 15 to help me out and be my father’s caretaker. He loved his grandpa and he wouldn’t leave his grandpa. If he was leaving, he’d call me to come over because my dad is a veteran and he has three purple hearts. He had his leg cut off and toes cut off on the other one, so Isaiah would take care of him.”
Khorry Ramey is the daughter of Kevin “KJ” Johnson, Jr. and the niece of Joseph “Bam Bam” Long. Bam Bam died on July 5, 2005 due to a lack of agency shown by police during a medical emergency. KJ was executed by the state of Missouri on November 29, 2022.
“Taking it day by day is hard.”

KHORRY RAMEY IS A 19-YEAR-OLD BLACK WOMAN from St. Louis and mother to her infant son Kaius. Khorry was only two years old when her uncle “Bam Bam” died following a medical emergency in the family home with Kirkwood Police Department officers on the scene. That day, July 5, 2005, officers were at the home looking for Kevin “KJ” Johnson, Jr., Khorry’s father and Bam Bam’s older brother.

Later that day, believing the officers to be responsible for Bam Bam’s death, KJ shot and killed William McEntee, one of the police officers that had been present. Reportedly, KJ said, “you killed my brother,” before shooting McEntee. After being arrested and charged for the shooting death of McEntee, KJ was convicted and sentenced to death. KJ was 19 years old at the time. Bam Bam was just 12. Two years after Bam Bam’s death in 2007, when Khorry was four years old, her mother, Dana Ramey, was killed in front of her.

To Khorry, KJ was the most important person in her life. She visited him as often as she could and spoke with him at least once a week. Throughout her schooling, she was encouraged by her dad to study and take challenging classes. After graduating from high school, KJ supported her educational and career ambitions to become a nurse.

In September 2022, Khorry gave birth to Kaius, and she received support, advice, and love from KJ as she adjusted to being a new mom. In October, Khorry took Kaius to meet his grandfather. Their visit was the first and only visit the three of them had together.

As KJ’s execution date neared in 2022, his story gained national attention due to his personal evolution in the decades since the killing, as well as resurfaced evidence of racially biased sentencing.

Despite multiple attempts made by Khorry, KJ, and legal advocates—not only was KJ denied clemency, but the state also rejected her and her father’s requests for her to be a witness during his execution. Due to their close bond, and for her own closure, Khorry wanted to be present as her father took his last breaths.

Weeks after our interview with Khorry, her father, KJ, was executed by the state of Missouri on November 29, 2022. KJ was 37 years old.

The state’s role in preventing access to a loved one as they are dying, or are deceased, was common among the women we spoke with, as was the demonization of their loved one in most mainstream news narratives. Like her peers, Khorry continues to honor and advocate for the loved ones she has lost.
Khorry: MY UNCLE WAS 12 WHEN HE DIED.

He was born with a heart condition that was really bad. And one day he began to have seizures, and instead of police helping him, they kind of just stepped over him and continued to look for my dad because I believe my dad had a warrant. Instead of helping my uncle and providing the right medical attention that they should have been providing to him, they kind of just let him die and they wouldn’t let my grandma get to him at all. And it was like my dad was watching the whole time, even though the police were looking for him, he was watching what was going on and it kind of hurt him to watch his little brother die and just seem so helpless.

With everything going on, I feel like I’m more sympathetic toward others. If they have a loved one behind bars or anything that I see, I’m just kind of thinking about both sides of the story. Because most of the time it’s just one story told.

I feel like people are inconsiderate of how we feel and they just say whatever and they don’t really know my dad or know me enough to kind of say what they say.

I would like to share that my grandma’s having a hard time with this. She lost a son that day and she could possibly lose another son. So it’s affected her really bad. She doesn’t want to talk about it because it’s just so hurtful to her. My family members, they’re all having a hard time with this and my dad himself is having a hard time with this. So it’s just a lot for my family and it’s putting them through a lot.

I would like people to know that it’s a struggle. It’s really hard, especially trying to stay strong, stay positive, and think positive. And it’s just, yeah, it’s just hard growing up. It’s hard thinking about it. It’s hard, and just trying to take it day by day is hard.

With everything going on with my dad and my uncle, especially being pregnant, I’m really emotional and it’s just the wrong time for everything. I find myself crying a lot and getting just really sad about the whole thing. It’s just a lot for me.

The future that I dream of... I want to go back to school and become a nurse or LPN and just be a good mom. And if anything was to happen to my dad, I would hope that I’m strong enough to take it. And yeah, just be strong.
Remembering Bam Bam Long

“My uncle, Bam Bam. The day he died, he came and got me and we went to the park and before he died he dropped me off back at home.”

“I plan to tell my son that he was, from what I’ve heard, from the stories that I’ve heard, he was really energetic. He was nice and he just loved everyone and was always there for everyone.”

Remembering Kevin “KJ” Johnson, Jr.

“I would like people to know that my dad is not a bad person. He’s not a monster. He’s not somebody who is rude. He’s a kind person. He’s really caring and he’s a good father even though he’s behind bars. And he tries his best to do, to be a part of my life as much as he can.”
Wanda Parker is the mother of Deilo Rogers, a 31-year-old man who died in custody at the Farmington Correctional Center in St. Francois County, Missouri on June 11, 2021.
“Losing a child . . . it’s like a part of me has left.”

WANDA PARKER is the mother of Deilo Rogers and two other children. In June 2021, Deilo Rogers died while he was incarcerated at Farmington Correctional Center (FCC) in Farmington, Missouri.

With a release date of August 3, 2021, Deilo and his family were eager for him to come home. Due to circumstances still unknown to Ms. Parker, that would never happen.

Wanda has faced significant hurdles while attempting to gain information regarding Deilo’s death. Initially, Farmington prison staff would not tell Wanda how her son died or where his body was located. She tracked his body to the St. Francois County morgue and was granted access to him days later.

Even after retaining an attorney, the Missouri Department of Corrections refused to share information, including Deilo’s death certificate. Wanda did not receive her son’s death certificate until over one year after Deilo’s death.

To this day, Wanda does not know how her son died. She was originally told that her son’s “heart had given out” and that “he fell.” The first autopsy, which was completed by a Farmington-based forensic pathologist, reported the cause of death to be acute fentanyl intoxication, or a fentanyl drug overdose. Wanda never knew her son to use drugs. She paid to get a second autopsy, completed four days after Deilo’s death which reported the cause of death as asphyxia from aspiration of gastric emesis, meaning he suffocated on his own vomit. The pathologist who did the second autopsy noted injuries and bruising on his face indicative of an assault, and as possibly relating to his suffocation.

Through her grief, Wanda lovingly remembers Deilo and how he did what he could to make sure his mother, sisters, and children were doing okay. He was a very good artist, with the dream of becoming a tattoo artist once he was released from prison. He frequently sent homemade cards to his family for birthdays and holidays. When we spoke with Wanda in the fall of 2022, she indicated that the Missouri Department of Corrections still had some of his artwork.

Wanda wants to work with people who are concerned about incarcerated individuals, their rights, how they are being treated, and what is occurring inside prison facilities. She is excited to be getting involved with the Fatal State Violence Response Program.
**Wanda:** LOSING A CHILD IS VERY HARD. It’s like a part of me has left. I’m still numb and can’t believe that my son—he’s not here anymore.

I have his picture and I look at it, and it’s like I’m in a dream. And it’s been a year. I know he’s gone, but I just keep expecting a call from him. Because he always called, and I can just hear him in my head laughing. “Hey, mom, what’s going on? Can’t wait to come home.” This is all that replays in my mind. Sometimes, I wish it was a dream.

The system is a failure. I really feel that because Deilo was incarcerated, no one cared about him. Because he made a bad choice in life, he was considered a “bad person.” No one has faith in him. He was nobody to them, to the justice system, to the prison. No one wants to take care of it. No one wants to talk about it. It’s just a “drug overdose.” It is what it is. “He’s just a statistic.” But it hurts me, mentally, that I have to keep going daily. Because I’m shocked. It’s traumatizing to talk and even think about my only boy that’s no longer here.

From day one, when I got the call that Deilo had passed, [the prison staff] were very inconsiderate. They gave me very limited information. For several months, I couldn’t get a death certificate. I couldn’t get any of his medical records. They told me I was not entitled to the police report. It took several months to receive any kind of information. Every time I called, they would tell me that they would call back, and never did. They were horrible.

Mentally, it’s exhausting, because I don’t know what happened. I don’t have any closure. And for me to just deal with it and live with it for the rest of my life when my son is no longer here, it hurts bad.
I have support from my daughters, but I want support from the system. I just want to be able to get some kind of answer, a response back.

I feel for other families. I actually had a lot of people reach out to me that had incarcerated loved ones that passed away in the system. I want to be able to get together and help our loved ones. I would love to work with people that are concerned about incarcerated men and women, their rights, how they’re being treated, what they’re doing in the prison facilities.

I want to be able to help other families with loved ones being incarcerated, not having rights. We are all human beings and we should treat people how we want to be treated.

Remembering Deilo Rodgers

“My son was very energetic. He was the life of the party. He was just so fun, goofy. He loved his family. Deilo was a father of three children—ages 10, 11, and 12. He was a big brother and always looked out for his sisters.”

“He came from a wonderful family. Good mentors. A father, mother, grandmother, grandfather. He was a very smart child. He was a sweet boy.”

“Even with him being incarcerated, he was always very positive, uplifting. [his] spirit was great. Even though what he was going through, he still managed to try to make sure we were okay.”

“He was ready to come home, to be with his family, and turn over a new leaf.”
IN HER WORDS
MARIA MILLER

Maria is the oldest sister of Larry Miller, who was killed in June of 2014 while in custody at Crossroads Correctional Center.
“I still hurt. Oh, it still hurts.”

MARIA IS THE OLDEST SISTER OF LARRY MILLER, who was killed on June 9, 2014 while in custody at Crossroads Correctional Center in Cameron, MO. He was 33 years old. Just months later, Maria lost her brother, Harrol. Harrol Berry and her son Courtney Williams Sr. lost their lives to gun violence in November and December of 2014, respectively.

Due to the publication’s focus on fatal state violence, Maria spoke to us primarily about her experiences losing her older brother, Larry Miller, who died in state custody. But the loss of Harrol and Courtney is inextricable from the ways state violence has upended her life, as so often, Black women and their communities are fighting battles on multiple fronts that are only exacerbated by deadly encounters with the state.

Losing three loved ones to violence altered Maria’s life in a way beyond words. She experiences severe trauma and still struggles daily with the agony that comes with your loved ones being taken away long before their time. After some time, Maria channeled her suffering and anger with the way the state has treated her family into fighting on behalf of others.

Maria is an impassioned anti-gun violence activist as well as prison reform and human rights advocate. She founded Our Lives Matter in St. Louis, MO, a nonprofit dedicated to mentoring troubled youth, providing a resolution to gun violence, and supporting incarcerated people in Missouri and their families. Over the years, Maria has organized annual events that give back to the community, including back-to-school drives and basketball shoot-outs, “Shooting Hoops Instead of Guns.” She has also built a trustworthy relationship with clients and families inside the Missouri Department of Corrections (MDOC) for whom she has stood against the Director of MDOC, as well as the Governor, in rallies asking for human rights for those incarcerated and investigations into wrongful convictions. Maria has helped get many false violations dismissed and expunged, and people released from prison and reunited with their families, safe and alive.

She is the author of My Way Out, published in 2018.
In six months, I lost Larry, my baby brother, and my son. So I lost three.

Maria: WHEN HE PASSED AWAY, I can’t even tell you the words, the way you feel. I didn’t get the call, my grandmother did, and she literally fainted.

In six months, I lost Larry, my baby brother, and my son. So I lost three.

When you lose like that, you will forget to love yourself. I didn’t even know what anxiety was until I started losing loved ones and I had a panic attack and end[ed] up in the hospital. That trauma, you don’t even realize what it does to your body. And sometimes we don’t even know how to begin to deal with it. I still hurt. Oh, it still hurts.

The courts did him wrong, and the prison really did him wrong. When I saw how those people did me and my family disrespectful, I’m saying disrespectful, when you won’t even tell a person how their loved one died. You won’t even give them an answer to their death for three years? I didn’t know what to do. I was like, well, what you can do right now is you can try to stop this from happening to other people in there. I have an organization, Our Lives Matter. When I couldn’t get justice, I started advocating.

There’s a letter that Larry wrote about a year before his death. And I stumbled upon that letter. In it, he was like, “Sis, I need your help. They’re doing us bad down here.” Now, I didn’t find that letter until after he was deceased. And at the end of the letter, he says, “Go hard and go strong.” He said, “They’re going to try to run you around, but whatever you do, stay on them.” So that is what the organization was started for. I got started because of the death of my brother, and because I couldn’t get help from anyone. So it’s to remember his legacy, his loyalty, and his love.

One of the biggest challenges I’ve seen, and this is also a challenge that hurts my heart because it makes me helpless: As strong as I fight, [the system] don’t have to answer to us.

It’s opened my eyes to the courts, it’s opened my eyes to the prisons. It makes me not just be this kind of person to say, “Oh they did it. They deserve it.” Sometimes, even if they did it, do they deserve 52 years, do they deserve 101 years? No, they don’t.

So whenever I’m able to help someone out of a horrible situation or help get them home, I remember this is what he didn’t get. So to remember his legacy, not what the media tried to make him be, not what the Missouri Department of Corrections made him be, but the love, the loyalty, and his legacy—it lives on every time Our Lives Matter does something for someone to help them.
Remembering Larry Miller

“Growing up, for a while, it was just the three of us. And my mother would always—you know how siblings fight—and she would always tell us, ‘You don’t fight each other. You love each other. If anything happens to me, you’re all you got.’ So that forced us to be close-knit. No matter what we went through, we would stick together.”

“Larry was a football player, he was a running back and Larry was so good at football. He would just run, he was so good. He loved football. So that’s one of the memories about Larry that makes me smile.”

“And I remember him being wrongly convicted, and incarcerated. For ten years, we just stayed in contact, never just let him do his bid alone. That reflects the bond that we had. I didn’t know it then, but I know it now.”

Larry leaves behind two children, Larry Miller and Larron Miller.
Lexii Alexander is a 24-year-old Black transgender woman from St. Louis. She is currently incarcerated in Mineral Point, MO at the Potosi Correctional Center.

*Social death occurs when a social group is treated as though they are not fully human or dead although they are alive. The political and social systems that reaffirm these persons’ disposability in society actively hinder their ability to survive. As a result, these persons are at greater risk of violence and death because society does not care what happens to them.
“There’s a war in America, and there’s a fight within us.”

LEXII ALEXANDER IS A 24-YEAR-OLD BLACK TRANSGENDER WOMAN and a veteran from St. Louis. She is currently incarcerated in Mineral Point, MO at the Potosi Correctional Center after transfers from the Algoa Correctional Center and the Eastern Reception, Diagnostic, and Correctional Center. Previously, she was held in the St. Louis County Jail and the St. Louis City Justice Center (CJC).

Lexii grew up in South St. Louis City and attended Northwest and Sumner High Schools. She lived with her grandparents, and they still remain very close. Lexii’s grandparents visit her in prison at least once a month and Lexii speaks to her grandmother almost daily.

Throughout her detention, Lexii has survived repeated instances of sexual violence and discrimination on account of her identity as a Black transgender woman. She has been verbally harassed by prison officials, called an “abomination,” been refused psychiatric services, and repeatedly placed in solitary confinement. During her time detained at the CJC, Lexii was frequently misgendered and called “boy” and “sir” by staff and detainees. In one instance, she was maced by a lieutenant for refusing to take off her breast cups.

Lexii fears for her life every day and speaks to an overwhelming culture of death in prisons—as she has observed people around her pass away, has survived life-threatening harm, and has been pushed to the brink of suicide repeatedly by state violence. Her placement in male detention facilities embodies the state’s blatant disregard of trans identities and their safety. This fate is not uncommon, as the majority of trans people in America are still housed in facilities based on the sex they were assigned at birth, despite evidence that trans women are at a significantly higher risk of abuse and assault than the general prison population. The carceral system has, in many ways, left Lexii for dead.

Even so, Lexii remains resilient and unapologetic about expressing her identity, and lives a life championing acceptance and the importance of individuality.
Lexii: MY NAME IS ALEXANDER HOWELL, but I’m in the process of changing it to Alexiis Xa’Leena “Lexii” Alexander. My pronouns are she and her. I am a Black trans woman born in the City of St. Louis on November 7, 1999, the last of the nineties babies.

I have engaged in some activities that led to incarceration and, during that period of time, I have been completely harassed sexually.

I have been raped. I have been sexually assaulted by officers and voyeurized. I’ve been on suicide [watch] and attempted suicide here within the Department of Corrections from dealing with rape and with the tauntings and teasings of other people and whatnot.

Unfortunately, a lot of correctional officers within the Department of Corrections look at things as if it’s their way or no way at all, and that’s not how it should be. We should all be equally contributing toward each other instead of against each other. I didn’t have a sociological view of prisoners versus inmates and, now, unfortunately, I do because of the way that the officers treat us. I feel like there’s a lot of obstruction of justice among the lieutenants, the higher-ranking supervisors, and officials to protect the Department of Corrections’ name.

The inspector[s] general within the Department of Corrections do not have the best interest of the inmates, and it’s more so their interest to protect the officers within the Department of Corrections. The inspectors and investigators need to not just look at the officer side of things but need to look into the inmate side. The officers are part of the problem too, and we need a more transparent viewpoint of things between inmates and officers rather than just trying to point the finger. Pointing the finger gets us nowhere.

Many of the officers here don’t honor the pride of—there’s a policy, specifically D18-13, that’s sexual assault harassment. There’s a section specifically for transgender and intersex inmates, and the officers, like I said, they don’t honor the policies.

They completely feel as if they have the right to take your dignity and pride, and that’s what they will do.

It’s just frightening. It’s very frightening. Personally, I feel the Department of Justice system, they definitely have some work to do, especially under the provisions of, unfortunately, Governor Michael Parson. We need more political leaders to come into the prison and see for themselves how the inmates are treated.

When I first got into prison, I was a very, very positive person. Now, I’m very much more cautious and alert to things around me.
I feel that there’s a lot of discrimination [towards] not just the Black community, but especially the LGBT community, especially being in the male institution. No one should be judged because of the way they live their life. Personally, with me, I stay to myself and show my gender expression. Right now, I currently, I wear makeup, thank God. Gender expression is a big thing for me here.

I live my life. You live yours. You have an issue with it, go about your day, and I will go about mine. I will stand for my own, but also I had to learn to understand those certain ways that you project yourself bring certain attention, and you have to find a way to deal with it. It definitely changed my perspective on how the community needs to be. There’s a war in America, and there’s a fight within us.

It’s not that I wish for people to understand what it’s like to be in my shoes. I wish we all could just find a way to better understand each other, to be able to live around each other. Although we all have our differences, the differences are what make the world go round. It is what makes everybody who they are. If we can be our individual selves, I feel like we can get a lot more done.
The firsthand testimonials shared in this publication offer a lens into the tremendous loss and hardship caused by police and carceral institutions acting in our names. As an organization dedicated to addressing state violence and the criminalization of poverty, we are committed to supporting the families of those killed by the state and to collaborating with others to realize a future in which all of our people live freely and flourish.

There are countless individuals and groups in St. Louis and across the country who are organizing, advocating, and impacting change, and ArchCity Defenders’ intent with this publication is to increase the visibility and awareness of how Black women and women of color survivors are directly impacted by fatal state violence.

Our conversations with Tammy, Toni, Gina, Khorry, Wanda, and Maria highlighted perpetual harms that Black women and women of color survivors face in the aftermath of state-sanctioned violence. Across their stories, we heard similar experiences of these women taking on greater responsibility as mothers and mother figures for their grieving families while navigating changing relationships and dynamics that are often strained and fractured due to the pain of losing their loved ones. While leading their families and communities through tragic loss, these women also face challenges from the media, which often disparage and vilify their loved ones, and inaccurately report the circumstances of their loved ones’ deaths. On top of that, healing is made even more difficult, if not impossible, when the state imposes barriers to learning how their loved ones truly died. This looks like family members being denied access to their loved one’s body, and being denied key information and documents, despite filing Sunshine requests through legal counsel. Despite facing challenges on every front, Black women and women of color survivors are still advocating for their loved ones, running foundations, and striving for justice inside of courtrooms, at vigils, and in the press, for years after losing their loved ones.

Lexii’s story echoes survival and persistence—further exposing the state’s default posture of harm and punishment as a stand-in for public safety.

Throughout these stories, we hear women from across the state and over several years confirm the state’s failure to provide transparency and accountability following perilous incidents; the social death of surviving harm; and the multifaceted harms caused by institutions purported to be correctional, just, protective, and rehabilitative.

These stories demonstrate why we need to deepen our understanding of fatal state violence, whom it impacts, and how. They also demonstrate the growing evidence that police, jails, and prisons do not make communities safer, but rather in many cases actively ruin, endanger, and end lives. We can all make choices to support, learn more, reach out, and get involved.

We do not have all the answers, but we are committed to finding them in concert with others, and we invite you to join us.
Our Work

ArchCity Defenders addresses fatal state violence through our modes of holistic legal advocacy, which include systemic litigation, legal representation, media and policy advocacy, community collaborations, and social services.

To get a sense of what this work looks like—the cases, stories, key data findings, and to view the portraits of and video interviews with the women featured in this publication—visit: www.archcitydefenders.org/fatalstateviolence

As a continuation of our litigation, organizing, and advocacy efforts, ArchCity Defenders and Faith for Justice launched the Fatal State Violence Response Program, a strategic initiative that supports surviving families of those killed by the police and/or who died in state custody in the St. Louis Region. The services are free, volunteer-run, and open to all surviving families. Core components of the program include the following:

Crisis response
Trained volunteer teams, equipped with trauma-informed techniques, support families in the immediate aftermath of losing a loved one and with ongoing organizing.

Holistic, supportive services
The FSV Response Program connects with communities of survivors, namely families of those killed by police or who died while in jail or prison custody, to provide ongoing social support and connection to resources like attorneys, mental health providers, and accompaniment to court or other government agencies.

Community building and advocacy
Every third Friday of the month, we hold space for healing practices, power building, political education, and grassroots organizing to fight for justice and create change with families and communities impacted by FSV.

For more information on the monthly meetings and ways to get involved with the Fatal State Violence Response Program, please email FSVResponse@gmail.com.

If you want to report a death in custody, police shooting, or issue of fatal state violence, please call the Crisis Response Hotline: (314) 643-6244. The hotline operates 24 hours a day year-round.

Throughout the year, there are many vigils, anniversaries, and community events organized by the Fatal State Violence Response Program. Follow ArchCity Defenders, Faith for Justice, and the Fatal State Violence Response Program on social media for updates.
“In Her Words” is an ArchCity Defenders (ACD) publication. ACD is a holistic legal advocacy organization that combats the criminalization of poverty and state violence, especially in communities of color. ACD’s foundation of civil and criminal legal representation, social services, impact litigation, policy and media advocacy, and community collaboration achieves and inspires justice and equitable outcomes for people throughout the St. Louis Region and beyond.

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Photos featured throughout this publication are courtesy of the families we spoke with, MFAI, and Chuck Ramsay. The report cover image features portraits of Gina Torres, Khorry Ramey, Tammy Bufford, Toni Taylor, Wanda Parker, and Maria Miller. Despite multiple attempts, the state denied our request to take Lexii Alexander’s portrait while incarcerated.

We are deeply grateful to the individuals who use their powerful stories to shine light on the impact fatal state violence has had on their lives and their families: Tammy Bufford, Toni Taylor, Gina Torres, Khorry Ramey, Wanda Parker, Maria Miller, and Lexii Alexander. Their perspectives, like the moon over the infinite tides, brings us back and carries us forward.
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