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National

Garner case puts Staten Island's racial divide in spotlight

Correction: *An earlier version of this story inaccurately reported the number of New York City police officers who live on Staten Island. It has been corrected.*

By Amy Ellis Nutt December 7, 2014

NEW YORK — No protests, no chants and no bullhorn-amplified outrage echoed through the streets of Staten Island in the days after the world learned that there would be no criminal indictment in the death of Eric Garner.

But on Bay Street in Tompkinsville, on a sullen stretch of Staten Island sidewalk beneath a handwritten sign scrawled with the words “We Can’t Breathe,” 14 votive candles continued to burn in memory of Garner, 43.

No one in this neighborhood has forgotten. No one wants to forget.

“I think a lot of people have waked up,” said Jewel Miller, the mother of Garner’s 7-month-old daughter, as she wheeled a stroller near the memorial. “I hope they stay awake and stay in the fight.”

Eight miles away in Eltingville, which is home to many police officers — including Daniel Pantaleo, the officer who used a chokehold on Garner while attempting to arrest him — no one wants to talk about it.

“I’m sorry, I’d rather not,” said a young woman who lives next door to Pantaleo’s small brick house as she came outside to check the twinkling Christmas lights she’d just hung in her window.

Staten Island, often referred to as the “forgotten borough,” is the most insular of New York City’s five — there is no subway line connecting it to the other boroughs, and the quickest route to Manhattan is usually the ferry. That separateness has bred a fierce loyalty to one’s own geography and social group within the communities on the island, too. And none could be more different — and divided — than the north shore, where Garner lived and died, and the south, where a police car keeps a 24-hour watch across from Pantaleo’s house.

Describing this north-south divide, one Tompkinsville man who identified himself by the name Remarkable Blue, said simply:

“There are two Staten Islands. This side and that side.”

The tension between the two is the same one animating a national conversation about race right now, only more so. After several deadly confrontations between white police officers and unarmed African American men, the decision last week by a Staten Island grand jury not to indict Pantaleo has again highlighted the country’s stubborn racial, economic and cultural divides.

Those divides are starkly drawn on Staten Island. The north shore, which includes Tompkinsville, is twice as dense as the rest of Staten Island, and close to 70 percent of the population is African American, Hispanic or Asian American, according to the most recent census.

Along a 100-yard stretch of Bay Street across from Tompkinsville Park, men and women darted in and out of the deli, the beauty shop and the taxi stand on Friday, but many also lingered in front of the signs, candles and frozen roses that bloomed from the dirty patch of sidewalk where Garner took his last breath.

The south shore is 71 percent white, according to city statistics. Well-to-do Eltingville is nearly 80 percent white, and more than half of its residents are Italian. On Friday, SUVs, BMWs and the occasional police car busily traversed Eltingville’s suburban-style streets. A wreath hung on nearly every front door, and landscapers arrived to mow lawns and clean up leaves.

With the building of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge in the early 1960s, Staten Island became a magnet for police officers and firefighters, who were looking for open space and a chance to own a home. At least 3,000 of the 17,000 uniformed city police officers who live in New York City are residents of the island, many on the south shore, according to Patrick J. Lynch, president of the Patrolmen’s Benevolent Association.

Officer Justin D’Amico, who assisted Pantaleo in trying to arrest Garner and who has since been reassigned to desk duty, according to city officials, also lives on the south shore.

A retired Staten Island police officer who also lives on the south shore said he thinks Pantaleo was doing his job, a common view among residents of the neighborhood.

“It’s a high-crime area,” the former patrolman said of Tompkinsville. He noted that in recent years orders “sent down from higher-ups” have been all about policing petty crimes, such as the illegal selling of individual cigarettes, of which Garner was accused. These quality-of-life arrests, he explained, are part of the city’s long-standing “broken windows” policy, based on the theory that staying on top of smaller crimes will discourage the more serious ones.

"A cop is a cop. They do what they do no matter where ~~#331~~," he said.

The residents of Tompkinsville think otherwise.

"It's a racial issue here," said Miller, the mother of the 7-month-old. She thinks white police officers don't respect the African Americans of Tompkinsville. "The people here are low-income. But we take care of one another here. Staten Island is a very small community."

Of all the boroughs, Staten Island perhaps harbors the biggest contrasts. It is not uncommon to find a handful of wild turkeys loitering along a four-lane highway. Henry David Thoreau spent six months wandering the woods here, two years before he built that cabin in Massachusetts. And yet Fresh Kills once harbored the largest landfill in the world. The last shot of the Revolutionary War was fired at Staten Island from a British ship, and scenes from "The Godfather" were filmed in the borough.

Even African American history here is paradoxical: White Staten Islanders were some of the earliest slave owners, and yet just three miles west of Eltingville is the town of Sandy Ground. Established by free blacks in 1833, Sandy Ground is the oldest such community in North America.

But race remains the borough's great divider. In two Quinnipiac polls, both taken after Garner's death but before the grand jury declined to indict Pantaleo, an average of just 31 percent of all New York City residents said they think police treat blacks and whites equally. When broken down by borough, however, 60 percent of Staten Islanders said they think police treatment is equal.

John McCray, 51, shakes his head when asked to compare his part of Staten Island, the north shore, with Pantaleo's south shore.

"Two worlds apart," he said. "I can't shop there without being scrutinized."

Ten years ago, he said, he worked as a driver for an ambulette service and got lost on the south shore where he was supposed to pick up a patient at a nursing home. The police pulled him over and asked to see identification.

"They followed me to the nursing home," he said, "and then they followed me all the way out of the neighborhood. We as a community do not look at the whites who come over here [to Tompkinsville] with hatred. They look at us as if we're there to take something from them."

A friend of McCray's, George Taylor, sat on a stoop nearby and nodded.

“I don’t believe I’m welcome there because of the color of my skin,” said Taylor, president of his own patient advocacy business, Unified Home Care Service.

Miller, who gave birth three months before Garner died, sees one similarity between north and south shores.

“They take care of their own. They have their community,” she said.

But she doesn’t think much about Pantaleo or the south side. Her thoughts, for now at least, stay closer to home, where she says Garner is never far away. In fact, Miller says, she often feels him close by.

“Sometimes there’s a brushing,” she said. “A brushing of his presence. It’s so warm, so comfortable.”

She paused and her eyes seemed to gaze through the gray chill almost to New York Bay.

It was early afternoon, but the gunmetal sky made it seem much later. Miller leaned forward to draw the pink and white baby blankets around her sleeping daughter’s face.

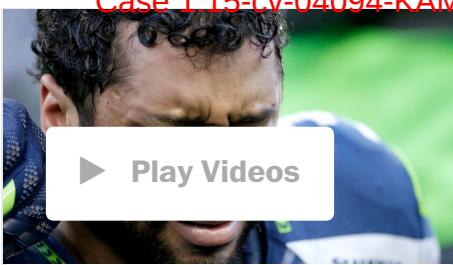
It was time to go home.

Alice Crites in Washington contributed to this report.

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