

June 27, 2023

Inter-American Commission on Human Rights

Michael Brown Jr. and Lezley McSpadden

Petition P-909-15

Dear Commissioners,

I write as the mother of Michael O.D. Brown to share with you my personal story of grief and loss, and how my life has been dramatically altered since August 9, 2014, when a former Ferguson police officer murdered my son.

The injustice that occurred on that day shattered not only my life as I knew it, but my family's life. Michael— “Mike Mike” as we called him—grew up in a close knit and loving family. He was not the only victim of the Ferguson police on August 9th—everybody who was lucky enough to know him suffered an enormous loss the day he was killed. I lost my kind and creative eldest son; his grandparents lost their first-born grandchild; and my three younger children, all just kids at the time, lost their big brother and role model.

It is vital that right now you get the chance to learn who my son was. Michael was an overcomer. In May of 2014, he celebrated his high school graduation from the Normandy School District. This was not an easy feat for him because he had learning challenges. He had an Individualized Education Plan in school, which meant he had to work harder than some to accomplish all that he achieved in his eighteen years. He struggled with verbal expression but thrived with computers and technology. He had a curious and creative mind,

often taking things apart to figure out how they fit then skillfully put them back together. Making music was a natural gift and a joyful hobby. I still haven't been able to listen to his music since he's been gone, but I know it is there waiting for me when I am ready.

No matter how tall Mike got—and he towered over me—he was still a kid, but he was well on his way to becoming an exceptional young man. He was learning to drive and looking forward to attending college and future milestones. Looking back on his life—his determination and perseverance—he showed us that he could have accomplished anything he wanted, had he been allowed the chance.

I see this when I look at my three younger kids today and observe how much he influenced them. As an older brother, Mike led by example and through his journey he showed his younger siblings how to overcome adversity. He taught them the skills they would have to rely on to survive so much heartbreak and trauma with strength and resilience. He paved the way forward for them when he graduated from high school, and they all followed in his path. My son was an incredible human being and he left a lasting mark on this world, particularly in the lives of those who knew him best.

While I hope knowing more of Michael's story gives you insight into how our community hurts, if you have not lost a child yourself, then you will never understand the gravity of the pain I have suffered since Michael's murder. The injustice of knowing his killer gets to celebrate milestones my son will never experience; the guilt I feel because I wasn't there to protect him; and the

mental health toll that a loss this excruciating creates, are things most people will never experience, and that no person ever should.

In the United States, resources are not readily available for people who experience what my family and I went through. I had to navigate finding community, healing, and counseling by myself. It is a lonely and isolated place. It shouldn't be this way, so I am working hard to make things better. I have built community with other mothers who have lost children to police violence and share my deep sense of grief and pain. We lean on each other for support and share resources for healing.

After losing Michael, I met with some of the Mothers of the Movement. At this time, one of the mothers gave me the idea of starting a foundation. In 2015, I sued the Ferguson Police Department and I used that money to create the Michael O.D. Brown Foundation. Today the Foundation is a force for change and part of that work includes Rainbow of Mothers, a community of support for grieving mothers. Together, we have attended Essence Fest and healing retreats; we share resources and deliver "love baskets" during the holidays; and we count on each other for care and emotional support.

One of my hopes with Rainbow of Mothers is to create a space for grieving parents to share their stories like I am doing now. I need people to understand that when a life is stolen by gun violence or police brutality, the impact goes much farther than the news cycle allows you to see. Every day is a battle against heartache and loss. The system that fails to deliver justice and accountability for the perpetrators of violence also denies families the resources to heal from it. Having lived through this pain and knowing other

families who suffer like mine, I lobbied Congress to pass the Mike Brown Bill and allocate federal funding to support the mental health of families grieving from loss inflicted at the hands of the state.

My own son is gone, and I cannot bring him back, so now I put my energy into projects that protect and enhance the lives of other children. Through my foundation, we created the Michael O.D. Memorial Scholarship for Social Justice, Performing Arts, and Trades. We formed a Michael Brown Growing and Learning Garden in the Jennings School District to teach children how to grow fruit and vegetables and promote a healthy lifestyle. And we started the Brown Cousins Candy Shop to teach kids about entrepreneurship.

These projects help me honor my son and build a legacy of lasting impact. Throughout his life, Mike was strong, resilient, and persevering. His strength inspires me to be strong for him and for my other three children. However, this is not the same as justice; none of it amounts to justice. None of it changes the reality that my son was killed by a man whose alleged duty was to protect. Or that my daughter, who was only 15 at the time, was outside that day to witness the scene of her brother's murder. Or that the St. Louis prosecutor's office dismissed my family and my son's humanity. Instead doing everything in its power to protect the killer of my child so that he could walk free and experience life's milestones after robbing my 18-year-old boy of the chance to do the same.

I may never experience true justice or peace after losing my child to such a depraved and hateful attack, but I hope that hearing my words and seeing my

pain today inspires you to endorse a societal transformation that protects other families from enduring this devastating loss.

Sincerely,

*Lezley McSpadden*