

The New York Times | <https://www.nytimes.com/article/george-floyd-who-is.html>

George Floyd, From 'I Want to Touch the World' to 'I Can't Breathe'

Mr. Floyd had big plans for life nearly 30 years ago. His death in police custody is powering a movement against police brutality and racial injustice.

By **Manny Fernandez and Audra D. S. Burch**

April 20, 2021

HOUSTON — It was the last day of 11th grade at Jack Yates High School in Houston, nearly three decades ago. A group of close friends, on their way home, were contemplating what senior year and beyond would bring. They were black teenagers on the precipice of manhood. What, they asked one another, did they want to do with their lives?

“George turned to me and said, ‘I want to touch the world;’” said Jonathan Veal, 45, recalling the aspiration of one of the young men — a tall, gregarious star athlete named George Floyd whom he had met in the school cafeteria on the first day of sixth grade. To their 17-year-old minds, touching the world maybe meant the N.B.A. or the N.F.L.

“It was one of the first moments I remembered after learning what happened to him,” Mr. Veal said. “He could not have imagined that this is the tragic way people would know his name.”

The world now knows George Perry Floyd Jr. through his final harrowing moments, as he begged for air, his face wedged for nearly nine minutes between a city street and a police officer’s knee.

Mr. Floyd’s gasping death, immortalized on a bystander’s cellphone video during the twilight hours of Memorial Day, has powered two weeks of sprawling protests across America against police brutality. He has been memorialized in Minneapolis, where he died; in North Carolina, where he was born; and in Houston, where thousands stood in the unrelenting heat on Monday afternoon to file past his gold coffin and bid him farewell in the city where he spent most of his life.

Many of those who attended the public viewing said they saw Mr. Floyd as one of them — a fellow Houstonian who could have been their father, their brother or their son.

“This is something that touched really close,” said Kina Ardoin, 43, a nurse who stood in a line that stretched far from the church entrance. “This could have been anybody in my family.”



George Floyd, left, with Jonathan Veal and Milton Carney at a high school dance in 1992.

Now a time stamp in the prolonged history of violence against black people, Mr. Floyd’s killing has inspired people of every race to march

in the streets and kneel, chanting “black lives matter” in hundreds of cities and small towns.

But Mr. Floyd, 46, was more than the nearly nine-minute graphic video of his death. He was more than the 16 utterances, captured in the recording, of some version of “I can’t breathe.”

He was an outsize man who dreamed equally big, unswayed by the setbacks of his life.

Growing up in one of Houston’s poorest neighborhoods, he enjoyed a star turn as a basketball and football player, with three catches for 18 yards in a state championship game his junior year.

He was the first of his siblings to go to college, and he did so on an athletic scholarship. But he returned to Texas after a couple of years, and lost nearly a decade to arrests and incarcerations on mostly drug-related offenses. By the time he left his hometown for good a few years ago, moving 1,200 miles to Minneapolis for work, he was ready for a fresh start.

When he traveled to Houston in 2018 for his mother’s funeral — they died two years, one week apart — he told his family that Minneapolis had begun to feel like home. He had his mother’s name tattooed on his belly, a fact that was noted in his autopsy.

Life in the Bricks

Mr. Floyd was born in Fayetteville, N.C., to George Perry and Larcenia Floyd. But he was really from a Houston neighborhood called the Bricks.

After his parents split up, his mother moved him and his siblings to Texas, where he grew up in the red brick world of Cuney Homes, a low-slung 564-unit public housing complex in Houston’s Third Ward that was named for Norris Wright Cuney, one of the most politically powerful black men in the state in the late 1800s.

Mr. Floyd’s mother — who was known as Cissy — was among the leaders of Cuney Homes and an active member of the resident council. She raised her own children and, at times, some of her grandchildren and some of her neighbors’ children, too.

As a child, Mr. Floyd was known in the Bricks as Perry, his middle name. As he grew, so, too, did his nicknames. He was Big Floyd, known as much for his big personality as his sense of humor.

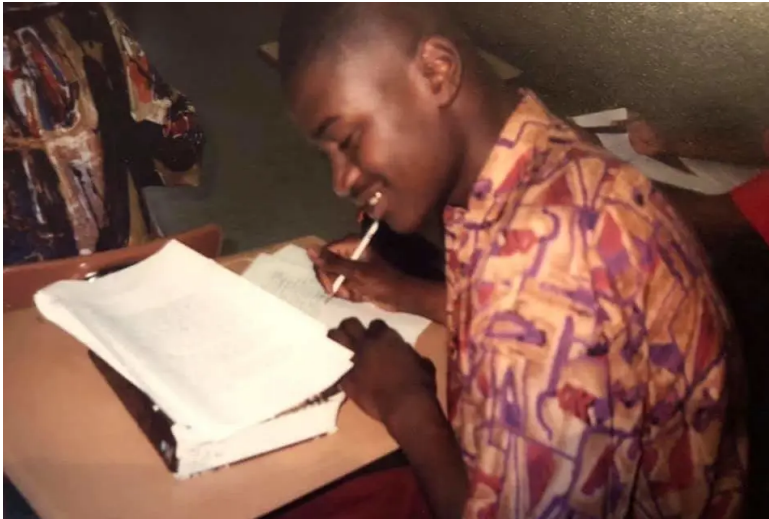
Mr. Floyd’s height — he was more than six feet tall in middle school — created a kind of mystique.

“You can just imagine this tall kid as a freshman in high school walking the hallways. We were like, ‘Man, who is that guy?’ He was a jokester, always laughing and cracking jokes,” said Herbert Mouton, 45, who played on the Yates high school football team with Mr. Floyd. “We were talking the other day with classmates trying to think, ‘Had Floyd even ever had a fight before?’ And we couldn’t recall it.”

Key Coverage of Civil Rights Trial Over George Floyd's Death

- Trial Starts for 3 Officers in George Floyd's Death
- George Floyd's Civil Rights Are Focus in Opening Arguments of Federal Trial
- Police Culture on Trial in Case Against Officers in Killing of George Floyd
- Derek Chauvin was convicted of George Floyd's murder. Could he testify against his fellow officers?

Mr. Mouton said that after the loss of a big game, Mr. Floyd would let the team sulk for a few minutes before telling a joke to lighten the mood. “He never wanted us to feel bad for too long,” he said.



Mr. Floyd in a classroom at Jack Yates High School in Houston. He was a celebrated football and basketball athlete.

Mr. Floyd saw sports as the path out of the Bricks. And so he leaned into his size and athletic prowess in a sports-obsessed state. As a tight end, Mr. Floyd helped power his football team to the state championship game in 1992.

In one exhilarating moment that was captured on video — and circulated after his death — Mr. Floyd soars above an opponent in the end zone to catch a touchdown pass.

After graduating from high school, Mr. Floyd left Texas on a basketball scholarship to South Florida Community College (now South Florida State College).

“I was looking for a power forward and he fit the bill. He was athletic and I liked the way he handled the ball,” said George Walker, who recruited Mr. Floyd. “He was a starter and scored 12 to 14 points and seven to eight rebounds.”

Mr. Floyd transferred two years later, in 1995, to Texas A&M University’s Kingsville campus, but he did not stay long. He returned home to Houston — and to the Third Ward — without a degree.

Known locally as the Tré, the Third Ward, south of downtown, is among the city’s historic black neighborhoods, and it has been featured in the music of one of the most famous people to grow up there, Beyoncé.

At times, life in the Bricks was unforgiving. Poverty, drugs, gangs and violence scarred many Third Ward families. Several of Mr. Floyd’s classmates did not live past their 20s.

Soon after returning, Mr. Floyd started rapping. He appeared as Big Floyd on mixtapes created by DJ Screw, a fixture in Houston’s hip-hop scene in the 1990s. His voice deep, his rhymes purposefully delivered at a slow-motion clip, Mr. Floyd rapped about “choppin’ blades” — driving cars with oversize rims — and his Third Ward pride.

For about a decade starting in his early 20s, Mr. Floyd had a string of arrests in Houston, according to court and police records. One of those arrests, for a \$10 drug deal in 2004, cost him 10 months in a state jail.

Understand the Civil Rights Trial Over George Floyd's Death

Police culture on trial. The federal civil rights trial of three former officers for their role in the killing of George Floyd centers on a crucial issue in American policing: the duty of officers to intervene against fellow officers when they witness misconduct.



Four years later, Mr. Floyd pleaded guilty to aggravated robbery with a deadly weapon and spent four years in prison. He was released in 2013 and returned home again — this time to begin the long, hard work of trying to turn his life around, using his missteps as a lesson for others.

Stephen Jackson, a retired professional basketball player from Port Arthur, Texas, met Mr. Floyd a year or two before Mr. Jackson joined the N.B.A. They had sports in common, Mr. Jackson said, but they also looked alike — enough to call each other “twin” as a term of

endearment.

“I tell people all the time, the only difference between me and George Floyd, the only difference between me and my twin, the only difference between me and Georgie, is the fact that I had more opportunities,” he said, later adding, “If George would have had more opportunities, he might have been a pro athlete in two sports.”



Veronica DeBoest said Mr. Floyd's mother, Larcenia Floyd, was one of the leaders of the Cuney Homes housing complex. Michael Starghill Jr. for The New York Times

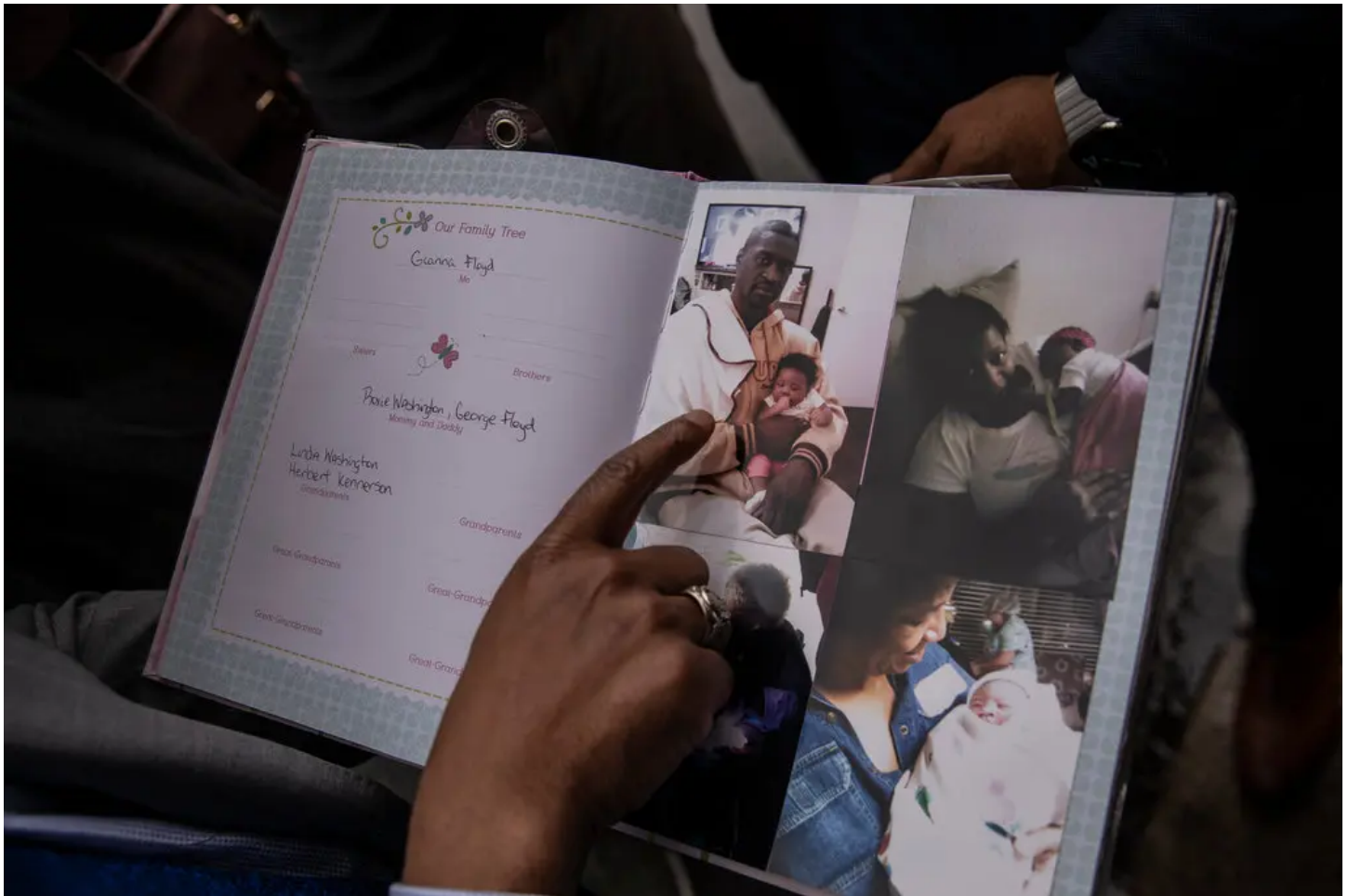
After prison, Mr. Floyd became even more committed to his church. Inspired by a daughter, Gianna Floyd, born after he was released, Mr. Floyd spent a lot of time at Resurrection Houston, a church that holds many of its services on the basketball court in the middle of Cuney Homes. He would set up chairs and drag out to the center of the court the service's main attraction — the baptism tub.

“We'd baptize people on the court and we've got this big old horse trough. And he'd drag that thing by himself onto that court,” said Patrick Ngwolo, a lawyer and pastor of Resurrection Houston, who described Mr. Floyd as a father figure for younger community residents.

Eventually, Mr. Floyd became involved in a Christian program with a history of taking men to Minnesota from the Third Ward and providing them with drug rehabilitation and job placement services.

“When you say, ‘I'm going to Minnesota,’ everybody knows you're going to this church-work program out of Minnesota,” Mr. Ngwolo said, “and you're getting out of this environment.”

His move would be a fresh start, Mr. Ngwolo said, his story one of redemption.



In a baby book for Gianna Floyd, the daughter of George Floyd, is a photo of the two of them together. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

A Protector of People

In Minnesota, Mr. Floyd lived in a red clapboard duplex with two roommates on the eastern edge of St. Louis Park, a leafy, gentrifying Minneapolis suburb.

Beginning sometime in 2017, he worked as a security guard at the Salvation Army's Harbor Light Center, a downtown homeless shelter and transitional housing facility. The staff members got to know Mr. Floyd as someone with a steady temperament, whose instinct to protect employees included walking them to their cars.

"It takes a special person to work in the shelter environment," said Brian Molohon, executive director of development at the Salvation Army Northern Division. "Every day you are bombarded with heartache and brokenness."

Even as Mr. Floyd settled into his position, he looked for other jobs. While working at the Salvation Army, he answered a job ad for a bouncer at Conga Latin Bistro, a restaurant and dance club.

Jovanni Thunstrom, the owner, said Mr. Floyd quickly became part of the work family. He came in early and left late. And though he tried, he never quite mastered salsa dancing.

"Right away I liked his attitude," said Mr. Thunstrom, who was also Mr. Floyd's landlord. "He would shake your hand with both hands. He would bend down to greet you."

Mr. Floyd kept a Bible by his bed. Often, he read it aloud. And despite his height, Mr. Floyd would fold himself in the hallway to frequently pray with Theresa Scott, one of his roommates.

"He had this real cool way of talking. His voice reminded me of Ray Charles. He'd talk fast and he was so soft-spoken," said Alvin Manago, 55, who met Mr. Floyd at a 2016 softball game. They bonded instantly and became roommates. "He had this low-pitched bass. You had to get used to his accent to understand him. He'd say, 'Right-on, right-on, right-on.'"

Mr. Floyd spent the final weeks of his life recovering from the coronavirus, which he learned he had in early April. After he was better, he started spending more time with his girlfriend, and he had not seen his roommates in a few weeks, Mr. Manago said.

Like millions of people, his roommates in the city that was to be his fresh start watched the video that captured Mr. Floyd taking his last breaths. They heard him call out for his late mother — “Mama! Mama!”

On Tuesday morning, 15 days after that anguished cry, Mr. Floyd will be laid to rest beside her.



Thousands of protesters gathered near the White House on Saturday to protest the killing of Mr. Floyd. Erin Schaff/The New York Times

Manny Fernandez reported from Houston and Audra D. S. Burch from Hollywood, Fla. Contributing reporting were Marc Stein from Dallas, Erica L. Green from Washington, and Dionne Searcey and Matt Furber from Minneapolis. Susan Beachy contributed research.