



# Staten Island Advance

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## Eric Garner's impact: In his first words, not his last

by LAUREN STEUSSY

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. — In an effort to make sense of Eric Garner's death and its ripple effect across the country, a local theater project is taking a deeper look not at Garner's ubiquitous last words, but his first words.

"Every Time You See Me" is what Garner can be heard saying at the beginning of the cell phone footage of his arrest.

It's also the name of a play that was written and will be performed by a mostly Staten Island cast this Friday at the Culture Lounge, inside the Staten Island Ferry Terminal.

The documentary-style play was written as part of an 11-day workshop for Sounds of Port Richmond, a theater partnership formed in 2013 by a trio of community partners, including Wagner College.

The play's name and Garner's words were significant because they suggested a need to communicate and talk about race, said Kevin Bott, facilitator of the workshop.

"When you think about what he said first — 'Every time you see me' — you think about a set of misconceptions that people make when they look at us," Bott said. "So if we could take time to hear each others' stories, we can get to the point where 'I can't breathe' can't happen."

### **Not 'about' Garner**

The program was formed two years ago after clashes between Port Richmond's African-American and Mexican immigrant communities. Wagner College's Port Richmond Partnership hoped to bring community members together to tell their own stories about the conflict and hopefully resolve it.

The consortium invited anyone with a story to tell to help write and be in the play.

Plans for the play were beginning to take shape last December when news broke of the grand jury's decision not to indict the police officers involved in Garner's death.

"We were angry and hurt, but we also felt like we were in a position to tell our own story," said Charnae Alexander, a founding member of Sounds of Port Richmond. "We just felt that, instead of having others say what was going on or what this meant, we could say it and be a voice for our own community."

The play is performed in several acts, ranging from funny to serious, many dealing with the issues encountered in Port Richmond or multicultural areas like it.

Aside from Garner's words and the cataclysmic effect they had on a year of unrest, the play ended up having nothing to do with him, said Kevin Bott, who is also the associate director of Syracuse University-based Imagining America.

"It's not what people think it is," Bott said.

"It's an invitation for people to be honest with themselves and their community. I think everyone wants healing, but how do we get that? I think it requires us all to confront our differences."

### **Tapping into the discomfort**

Bott came into the project thinking participants would interview their neighbors and fellow community members about issues of race.

But what ended up being more telling for them were the conversations they had among themselves. They were revealing, and at times uncomfortable, since the group was made up of many races, ages and sexualities, he said.

An example of that discomfort came when a young black man brought up the idea of “white privilege,” and how he didn’t necessarily believe it was a given.

“Most of the conversation was happening in generations of black people, so that night ended really intensely,” Bott said. “We were able to work through it, though, and some of that finds its way into the play.”

Bott knows it’s naive to think a production like this can change any of the race relations he sees played out in “Every Time You See Me.” He hopes it will at least start more conversations about it, though.

“I get overwhelmed by the largeness of the problem, of the past 450 years of slavery and its aftermath, and the smallness of what we can do,” Bott said. “But I know doing something like it is the only way change can happen.”

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### **‘Every Time You See Me’**

See a play at the St. George ferry terminal about race, written by Staten Islanders in the aftermath of Eric Garner’s death.

**Who:** Sounds of Port Richmond is a community-based theater partnership formed in 2013 by three parties: residents of the Port Richmond neighborhood of Staten Island, Wagner College and national arts group Imagining America

**What:** The trio facilitated a workshop with community members, mostly from Staten Island, in which they would write a play based on real-life stories.

**When:** Friday, July 17 at 2:15 and 5:15 p.m.

**Where:** The Staten Island Arts Culture Lounge, inside the Staten Island Ferry Terminal

**Cost:** Free, but RSVP to [jenny.kelly@wagner.edu](mailto:jenny.kelly@wagner.edu)