

No One Wants to Talk About Racial Trauma. Why My Family Broke Our Silence.

My daughter was too young to understand our family's past. I was still trying to understand it, too. Instead of trying to explain it right away, I took everyone to a cotton field.

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I wasn't sure if visiting a cotton field was a good idea. Almost everyone in my family was antsy when we pulled up to the sea of white.

The cotton was beautiful but soggy. An autumn rain had drenched the dirt before we arrived, our shoes sinking into the ground with each step. I felt like a stranger to the soil.

My daughter, Lily, then 5, happily touched a cotton boll for the first time. She said it looked like mashed potatoes. My dad posed for a few photos while I tried to take it all in. We were standing there — three generations strong — on the edge of a cotton field 150 miles away from home and decades removed from our own past. I hoped this was an opportunity for us to understand our story.

As a journalist, I cover the ways racism — including the violence that can come with it — can impact our health. For the past few years, I've been working on a documentary film and podcast called "Silence in Sikeston." The project is about two killings that happened decades apart in this Missouri city: a lynching in 1942 of a young Black man named Cleo Wright and a 2020 police shooting of another young Black man, Denzel Taylor. My reporting explored the trauma that festered in the silence around their killings.

While I interviewed Black families to learn more about the effect of these violent acts on this rural community of 16,000, I couldn't stop thinking about my own family. Yet I didn't know just how much of our story, and the silence surrounding it, echoed Sikeston's trauma. My father revealed our family's secret only after I delved into this reporting.

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Cotton is complicated. White people got rich off cotton while my ancestors received nothing for

their enslaved labor. My grandparents then worked hard in those fields for little money so we wouldn't have to do the same. But my dad still smiled when he posed for a picture that day in the field.

"I see a lot of memories," he said.

I'm the first generation to never live on a farm. Many Black Americans share that experience, having fled the South during the [Great Migration](#) of the last century. Our family left rural Tennessee for cities in the Midwest, but we rarely talked about it. Most of my cousins had seen cotton fields only in movies, never in real life. Our parents worked hard to keep things that way.

At the field that day, my mom never left the van. She didn't need to see the cotton up close. She was around Lily's age when her grandfather taught her how to pick cotton. He had a third-grade education and owned more than 100 acres in western Tennessee. Sometimes she had to stay home from school to help work that land while her peers were in class. She would watch the school bus pass by the field.

"I would just hide, lying underneath the cotton stalks, laying as close to the ground as I could, trying to make sure that no one would see me," my mom said. "It was very embarrassing."

She didn't talk to me about that part of her life until we traveled to Sikeston. Our trip to the cotton field opened the door to a conversation that wasn't easy but was necessary. My reporting sparked similar hard conversations with my dad.

As a child, I overheard adults in my family as they discussed racism and the art of holding their tongues when a white person mistreated them. On my mother's side of the family, when we'd gather for the holidays, aunts and uncles discussed cross-burnings in the South and in the Midwest. Even in the 1990s, someone placed a burning cross outside a school in Dubuque, Iowa, where one of my relatives served as the city's first Black principal.

On my father's side of the family, I heard stories about a relative who died young, my great-uncle Leemon Anthony. For most of my dad's life, people had said my great-uncle died in a wagon-and-mule accident.

"There was a hint there was something to do with it about the police," my dad told me recently. "But it wasn't much."

So, years ago, my dad decided to investigate.

He called up family members, dug through online newspaper archives, and searched ancestry websites. Eventually, he found Leemon's death certificate. But for more than a decade, he kept what he found to himself — until I started telling him about the stories from Sikeston.

"It says 'shot by police,' 'resisting arrest,'" my dad explained to me in his home office as we looked at the death certificate. "I never heard this in my whole life. I thought he died in an accident."

Leemon's death in 1946 was listed as a homicide and the officers involved weren't charged with any crime. Every detail mirrored modern-day police shootings and lynchings from the past.

This young Black man — whom my family remembered as fun-loving, outgoing, and handsome — was killed without any court trial, as Taylor was when police shot him and Wright was when a mob lynched him in Sikeston. Even if the men were guilty of the crimes that prompted the confrontations, those allegations would not have triggered the death penalty.

At a hearing in 1946, a police officer said that he shot my uncle in self-defense after Leemon took the officer's gun away from him three times during a fight, according to a Jackson Sun newspaper article my dad found. In the article, my great-grandfather said that Leemon had been "restless," "absent minded," and "all out of shape" since he returned home from serving overseas in the Army during World War II.

Before I could ask any questions, my dad's phone rang. While he looked to see who was calling, I tried to gather my thoughts. I was overwhelmed by the details.

My dad later gently reminded me that Leemon's story wasn't unique. "A lot of us have had these incidents in our families," he said.

Our conversation took place when activists around the world were speaking out about racial violence, shouting names, and protesting for change. But no one had done that for my uncle. A painful piece of my family's story had been filed away, silenced. My dad seemed to be the only one holding space for my great-uncle Leemon — a name that was no longer spoken. Yet my dad was doing it alone.

It seems like something we should have discussed as a family. I wondered how it shaped his view of the world and whether he saw himself in Leemon. I felt a sense of grief that was hard to process.

So, as part of my reporting on Sikeston, I spoke to [Aiesha Lee](#), a licensed counselor and Penn State University assistant professor who studies intergenerational trauma.

"This pain has compounded over generations," Lee said. "We're going to have to deconstruct it or heal it over generations."

Lee said that when Black families like mine and those in Sikeston talk about our wounds, it represents the first step toward healing. Not doing so, she said, can lead to [mental and physical health problems](#).

In my family, breaking our silence feels scary. As a society, we're still learning how to talk about the anxiety, stress, shame, and fear that come from the [heavy burden of systemic racism](#). We all have a responsibility to confront it — not just Black families. I wish we didn't have to deal with racism, but, in the meantime, my family has decided not to suffer in silence.

On that same trip to the cotton field, I introduced my dad to the families I'd interviewed in Sikeston. They talked to him about Cleo and Denzel. He talked to them about Leemon, too.

I wasn't thinking about my great-uncle when I first packed my bags for rural Missouri to tell the stories about other Black families. But my dad was holding on to Leemon's story. By keeping the file — and finally sharing it with me — he was making sure his uncle was remembered. Now I say each of their names: Cleo Wright. Denzel Taylor. Leemon Anthony.

The "Silence in Sikeston" podcast from KFF Health News and GBH's WORLD is [available on all major streaming platforms](#). A documentary film from KFF Health News, Retro Report, and GBH's WORLD will air at 8 p.m. ET on Sept. 16 on [WORLD's YouTube channel](#), [WORLDchannel.org](#), and the [PBS app](#). Preview the trailer for [the film](#) and [the podcast](#). More [details about "Silence in Sikeston."](#)

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