## We Buried Ajike. But We Are Still Standing.

***By Pamela Dias, Mother of Ajike "AJ" Owens***

I remember my daughter's voice—her laugh, her strength, her love for her four children. On June 2, 2023, that voice was silenced forever. My daughter, Ajike "AJ" Owens, was shot and killed by her neighbor after knocking on the door to defend her children from harassment.

Since that day, I've been doing what no mother should ever have to do: raising my daughter's children while grieving her loss. I've stood in courtrooms. I've spoken at rallies. I've had to relive the worst day of my life over and over - in front of cameras, strangers, and news cycles that eventually moved on.

But we're still here. Living the aftermath.

People think justice is a verdict. But justice doesn't bring your child back. It doesn't help you explain to your grandchildren why their mother is never coming home. And it doesn't prepare you for the silence that follows – when the headlines fade, when the hashtags stop trending, when the public attention shifts.

What happens to families like mine *after* the spotlight disappears?

We are left picking up the pieces—trying to pay funeral bills, cover lost wages, manage legal costs, and somehow keep going. We are expected to function, to survive, to parent—while carrying a grief most people can't begin to imagine. And when the violence is racially motivated, especially here in the South, you don't just lose a loved one. You lose your sense of safety. You live with the fear that justice may never fully come—and that it could happen again.

That's why, in Ajike's name, I co-founded the *Standing in the Gap Fund*. Because I know firsthand what it feels like to lose someone to racial violence – and to feel like the world has forgotten.

We launched the Fund  to make sure other families don't have to walk this road alone. It provides direct financial relief, emotional support, and healing resources to people and communities devastated by racial violence. We exist because the systems meant to protect us often fail us – again and again.

This work is rooted in the legacy of Black mutual aid, of caring for each other when the systems won't. And as the two-year anniversary of my daughter's death approaches, I'm asking the world not to just remember her – but to take action.

This June, we are focused on three urgent priorities:

1. **Pay Attention Again -** Read. Watch. Share. Reignite the conversation.

2. **Support the Work -**We're asking 100 new monthly donors to help us sustain this work.

3. **Refuse the Erasure -** Stand with us to ensure these stories don't disappear.

A sustaining donation doesn't just help the Fund grow—it can mean the difference between a family keeping a roof over their head after tragedy. It can mean affording therapy instead of sacrificing it. No one should have to choose between survival and healing.

Later this year, my daughter's story will reach new audiences through a documentary that shows the night she died and the years of failures that led up to it. I won't go into detail about the film, but I will say this: it's hard to know that people will watch my daughter's final moments on screen. It's even harder to think they might turn away once the screen fades to black.

My hope is that they don't just see how she died – but understand how she lived.

Ajike was not a headline. She was a mother. A friend. A protector. A woman who deserved, joy, safety, and life. Her children deserved to grow up with her. And I deserved to grow old with my daughter by my side.

The grief doesn't end. But I've learned that you can still speak, even when your voice shakes. That you can still stand, even when your world has fallen apart.

We buried Ajike. But we are still standing.

And I will keep standing – for her, for her children, and for every family who has faced what we've faced – and worse.