

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

MINNEAPOLIS: NOT GIVING UP ON POLICE ABOLITION

LAURA FLANDERS: Abolishing the police, if not in Minneapolis, then where? If systems change around policing in the United States were possible anywhere, a lot of people have thought it would be in the city of Minneapolis, Minnesota. In the wake of the police murder of George Floyd, thousands of Minneapolans took to the streets to demand not only justice for Floyd but a complete transformation of how their city does public safety. Movements for police abolition had been building in the city for years, a progressive majority was elected to the City Council in 2017. The Floyd murder prompted a supermajority of those council members to pledge to abolish the Minneapolis police department, the MPD. That news went viral, inspired people across the country to demand the same where they live and in the eighth ward of Minneapolis at the intersection of where Floyd was killed, local people shut down the street to create George Floyd Square, a police-free zone that's still there today. A year on, there've been many heartfelt memorials to Floyd, but fewer in-depth investigations into just what's been happening on the abolition front. Instead, conservatives and much of the establishment media have used the anniversary to declare that the effort to defund or abolish the police was misguided and has failed and they blame even the modest budget cuts that have been made for a decline in policing and a rise in violent crime. So what's the reality? In this episode, we take a look beneath the headlines and speak with the activists and City Council members at the heart of the story. The problem of police racism and of policing at all has been with us for generations, they say. It'll take more than a year to fix it.

ANDREA JENKINS: My name is Andrea Jenkins and I am the vice president of the Minneapolis City Council.

LAURA FLANDERS: Can you tell us a little bit about the feeling of the eighth ward that you represent in Minneapolis there right now?

ANDREA JENKINS: On Tuesday, which was the 25th, which was the anniversary yesterday, I attended a number of events. There was a call for silence, a moment of silence by the mayor throughout the city, as well as concerts. It's been kind of a festival-like atmosphere the last couple of days. And certainly the celebration is not about, you know, the murder of George Floyd. I think the celebration is more about the historic moment that we witnessed in seeing law enforcement officers being held accountable for their actions. Yesterday, in my mind, marked the beginning of how we can start the healing process.

ARIANNA NASON: I am Arianna and I am an auntie on the block. I am the village witch and I am a not-so-retired organizer. I live in the 38th and Chicago George Floyd Square neighborhood intersection, like, I'm right in the middle of this. The feeling that I really get in the square and that we really talk about in the square and in the village is that we are actively building the life that we want to see, the alternatives to police. So community is what keeps each other safe, and so we are building up community. We are constantly engaging with each other, engaging with neighbors, and inviting folks out and building collaborations. There is a lot of mourning, there is a lot of grief because we've also lost more people in the last year.

KANDACE MONTGOMERY: My name's Kandace Montgomery. I use she and they pronouns. I'm an organizer, strategist, cat mom, gardener and abolitionist. At the end of the day, George Floyd was a person, a human being who should still be here and though I think it is amazing and powerful what his community was able to build in response to that, and in calling for justice for his life, it's important that we remember that we have to grieve. And so, it was heavy for me. And we still are living in the same police state that killed George Floyd a year ago. And I think it's really time that we continue to reckon with that.

NEWS ANCHOR CHRIS HRAPSKY: Minneapolis City Council members at a rally about an hour ago have announced their plan to disband the Minneapolis police department.

CITY COUNCIL PRESIDENT LISA BENDER : Our commitment is to end our city's toxic relationship with the Minneapolis police department, to end policing as we know it, and to recreate systems of public safety that actually keep us safe.

LAURA FLANDERS: On June 7th, 2020, after nearly two weeks of nonstop demonstrations in the wake of George Floyd's murder, City Council members in Minneapolis came together in Powderhorn Park to announce their commitment to disbanding the police department. City Council member Cam Gordon was one of them. Talk about your expectations in that moment and what it felt like to be part of that response right then.

CAM GORDON: I think there was a real sense in the city of Minneapolis that government had abandoned us. Nobody can actually hear us, we're out there protesting, there's this trauma, the city is in misery. So people were saying, could you tell us that you want to make a change? And then, here's how we think you could tell us best. We'll get people, we'll come to this big park right in the middle of the city and we'll hold this event. And we want you to make a statement.

ANDREA JENKINS: I joined eight other of my colleagues on stage to make a pledge to the community. So to be clear, it wasn't an official City Council action. I mean, it wasn't like we were in a meeting and we all voted to defund the police, but I stood on stage and made that commitment to our community. And what I personally meant is how do we refund our

communities? You know, public safety encompasses 50, 60, 70% of the budget for the cities, and that comes at the expense of affordable housing, which is why we see this homeless crisis that is impacting almost every community in America. It takes away our ability to fully train our students and create the kinds of schools that we want to see in our inner cities and communities, and so we need to reallocate those funds and that's what that specific pledge means to me. But it also has to be a wholesale re-imagination of public safety and how that operates in our society.

LAURA FLANDERS: Isn't it going to also require a reconsideration of your whole city charter?

ANDREA JENKINS: That question is gonna be on our ballot.

CAM GORDON: There's two really onerous things in the charter that needed to be removed. One is the complete command and authority of all discipline that's given to the mayor. So then none of the other departments are like that in our city. Use of force, use of less lethal weapons, all of those policies aren't set by the Council, it's in the hands of the mayor. There's also a provision in the charter that required a minimum number of police officers that was actually put in in the sixties, led by the police union.

LAURA FLANDERS: You don't have control in the City Council over the police and how big it is and who counts as police and how you do safety in your town? Were you aware of that for a long time, councilwoman?

ANDREA JENKINS: I was not completely aware with all of the intimate details of the charter and how it related to the police. I was very much aware that the mayor has sole authority over the police. It's one of the only two responsibilities that are called out in the charter, but I was not aware of the limited authority of the City Council. In order to change our charter, we have to, A, have this referendum from the residents of the city, but even then we still have to get permission from the state legislature, which is a Republican-controlled legislature.

LAURA FLANDERS: As Andrea Jenkins, Cam Gordon and their colleagues on the City Council work for change inside government, activists on the outside have kept the pressure on, organizing for alternative forms of public safety, some of which don't require local government at all. Kandace Montgomery of Black Visions is one of those activists.

KANDACE MONTGOMERY: So Black Visions is a Black-led, queer and trans-centering community organization, we come out of the Movement for Black Lives, and many of us were formerly part of Black Lives Matter Minneapolis. And so Black Visions came together, many of us, the original founding team, because we wanted to build something that felt visionary still, that felt unapologetically Black and that was unapologetically Black, but also was able to be strategic.

LAURA FLANDERS: So talk about that moment, you're there just a couple of weeks after the murder of George Floyd and you have the Council members come out in favor of, you know, defunding the Minneapolis police department. And then how you think about what's happened since, is it lack of effort? Is it lack of trial or was it a not realistic demand?

KANDACE MONTGOMERY: Well, I think that that moment was important. Not only because we were able to build a stronger platform for the conversation around defunding the police and actually bring our councilmembers a lot further than they had the several years before that we had been leading this campaign. The council members were able to reduce the police budget by close to \$8 million. So that's really significant if you think about the amount of time spanned and the change that had happened coming from years before that when the police budget had only increased by millions and there's actually policy change and work that's happening, but it's just not as sexy and so CNN and ABC and NBC aren't out here with their cameras, because they're oftentimes only interested in looking at the tragedy and trauma of a burning building rather than following the real work that everyday community members have been putting in, since, you know, the summer of 2020.

LAURA FLANDERS: Other Black women that I've seen in the news in Minneapolis, some of them, anyway, are people from communities that feel that they are watching a rise in violence in their streets that is caused directly by a staffing shortage in the police, there's been an exodus of police officers and they attribute that to that cut, that \$8 million cut that you mentioned to the budget. How are you talking to them about what's going on? Are you talking to them about what's going on?

KANDACE MONTGOMERY: I always try to come from a place of compassion. I think folks are worried and want to feel safe in their communities, and that's a hundred percent valid. And what I oftentimes then remind folks of is that, you know, after spending \$190 million on policing, we still have a rise in crime. I don't think that policing is going to be the thing that changes that. The other thing I think is important to talk to people about is that at the same time we've had this national rise in crime, we also have had a pandemic, right, that is spread across the globe in which people have lost their jobs, their homes, access to their basic needs. So of course there's going to be a rise in crime because that's the only way that this country allows people to figure out a way to access their needs often. And so, you know, I think it's important for folks to not just look to the same solution of policing and actually look at maybe if we were as adamant about resourcing housing as we do to fight for policing that criminalizes poverty, we would see some different results. Oftentimes, you know, the people who I talk to that I am able to find alignment, what we are able to agree on is that it's a transition. We might have different priorities right now, but that fundamentally folks agree that if we start to really invest in our communities, we can wean our dependency away from police and that's a place that we're able to find middle

ground. It's just about the ways that we get there and the speed at which we get there that we can differ on. And I think that's okay because Black people also are not a monolith, and we come from different experiences and have different opinions and always have.

LAURA FLANDERS: In the days following the murder of George Floyd, people took over the intersection to create a memorial site that over the course of the year has grown into a 24-hour semi-sovereign police-free village. It's a space for mourning, for expressing outrage, for healing, for organizing, and on the night of Derek Chauvin's guilty conviction on all counts, a space for celebration. Activists say George Floyd square is a microcosm of the police-free society they wish to create. Not everyone agrees.

ANDREA JENKINS: It's a mixture, right? It's people from around the metropolitan area, from throughout the state, but also it's really immediate neighbors who live there too. You know, they have turned George Floyd Square into this sort of sacred space. The challenge, however, is that, you know, it has created opportunity for nefarious activities to flourish, carjackings, shootings. To date, Minneapolis has lost 33 people to gun violence which is atrocious and saddening.

LAURA FLANDERS: In this year?

ANDREA JENKINS: This, in 2021. The plans that I have for the Square continue to be the plans that I had even prior to George Floyd being murdered. That is we need to create a center for racial healing, which will likely morph into a center for social justice.

ARIANNA NASON: Andrea Jenkins wants to make the square into a center for civil rights and a museum, a place to visit historical memory, but it already is. It already, the intersection at 38th and Chicago is already a peoples-powered hub of civil rights and education and compassionate care. It already is. Just because the city doesn't have anything to do with it doesn't mean that there's lawlessness and just because the city doesn't actually know how to engage with it's own residents does not mean that we are doing anything wrong.

LAURA FLANDERS: How do you make a relationship between you and the square and the policymakers who, in the grand scheme of things, are not the enemy or at least not enemy number one?

ARIANNA NASON: No, I mean, they're not the enemy, but if they are doing everything in their power to suck up and to make sure that we're adhering to the systems of white supremacy that they chose to engage with, that's on them, that's not on us. We don't really need to engage with City Council members. We don't need to go out of our way to prove to City Council or prove to the mayor, all of which who have failed us and have blatantly manipulated their constituents for

the last year, if not more than that in other cases. It's not our job to try and appeal to their humanity.

LAURA FLANDERS: So what happens next? Two questions, you've got a lot of well-known people, members of Congress, the president who have shown up in Minneapolis and some have visited the square. What's your message to them, and maybe to the national media, what are they getting wrong in their "12 months later, where's the transformation" narrative?

ARIANNA NASON: What's really odd to me is that it feels like most media can only understand the square as like an organization or an entity or some type of identity of collective, but it's really not. This narrative of like, people can speak for the square. Like Marcia Howard is out and very visible a lot of time but Marcia is just very visible, she's been doing this work for years and years but she is not the leader. She is a person that has leadership skills in the square. There are many of us that have leadership skills there, this is a leader-full village but we all make decisions together. We're not trying to fight against the city, we are not trying to fight with politicians. Like if they want to come and talk with us, like our door is always open, but it also means that they're going to have to talk to a lot more people than just one or two individuals that a politician or the media might perceive as a leader because I can't speak for anyone but myself.

LAURA FLANDERS: For those who are looking at what you've been through in the last year, and maybe, like you, had high hopes a year ago, what's your message? Because it almost sounds as if everywhere you turn, the problem gets deeper, more complex, and more difficult for you at the local level to shift. Does that put you off local service, local politics?

CAM GORDON: No, I don't think so at all. In fact, I think it's an exciting time for the city. When the verdict came in from the trial, there was this enormous sense of relief, like we'd made, we got through phase one or something. So the conviction of Derek Chauvin on all charges was really significant and it was like a great weight lifted off the city. And then I guess there's a fear that we'll fall back into the status quo, but I don't think so, 'cause I think when that weight was lifted, people said now let's dig in further. And that's when the petitioning continued and we came in and we're gonna see this change on the ballot and I hope it passes on with enormous majority and comes in. So then we can start digging in more, like, what is our new department of public safety going to be? How can we help bring these pieces of what we're doing already now to transform public safety? I think we're at a really big turning point. I think what everybody wants to see is Minneapolis lead the way to show us how we can do things differently, do it thoughtfully, you know, do it well-researched, do it with community support and consensus so we're all kind of taking our steps together, but let's carve that path out together of how we can have a new re-imagined way of delivering public safety that works for everybody. And we can root out all the insidious racism that is embedded into it.

ANDREA JENKINS: If it was easy, I heard somebody say the other day, if it was easy, Frederick Douglass would have had it figured out 250 years ago. I do believe that the conviction of Derek Chauvin was a historic, watershed moment. Many of the reforms that are being placed in the Georgia Floyd Reform act, Policing Act, we have implemented here. Our officers wear body cams, they are required to turn them on. Two years ago, we funded two positions. All they do every day, all day is review body cam footage and look for issues. Not many communities are doing that around the country. It's very challenging work, which I am absolutely positive the New York Times and MSNBC and CNN and Politico and the Hill and all of these people absolutely recognize, but it makes, you know, it's a good news story that's on the cover of every publication in the country. A year later, what is changed? One year in the midst of a pandemic where all of us are sitting in our houses? These issues are very deep, Laura, and they're challenging to overcome but I think we can, I'm optimistic. I'm, you know, I mean, I'm running for reelection so you can't run for political office and not be optimistic, I think we can change.

ARIANNA NASON: The village has been having, like, big collective conversations that yes, like when Black liberation happens then liberation will happen for all but Black liberation is also inherently tied to Indigenous sovereignty. So for us to be supporting Black liberation, we need to be supporting the symbiotic relationship with Indigenous sovereignty, and then let's also talk about how we can best support global movements. We have a huge collective of Palestinian folks in the crew as well. To also have ceremony held by Meshika dancers and Anishinaabe and KOTA jingle dress dancers and then to have everything be open and closed by Black ministers. I love it, like that's a Sunday afternoon.

KANDACE MONTGOMERY: I know that it's hard because you know, sometimes movement and those who are elected into these more official positions have conflict intention, but I feel really proud of the work that our coalition has been able to do with many of the city council members around getting in alignment of this question on the ballot to establish the Department of Public Safety here in Minneapolis, but I know like many of us, they are pulled thin and I think especially for the Black council members are so much is being asked of them in many unfair ways. And so just, yeah, I think sending a lot of love to them.

LAURA FLANDERS: What's your vision of that shared safety and do you see sprouts of that future anywhere out there today?

KANDACE MONTGOMERY: First, my vision of safety starts with folks having homes and food and systems of care easily accessible to them at no cost. I talk about oftentimes what it looks like the morning after the uprisings. I live just two blocks away from where George Floyd was murdered, and every single morning I saw community members out with their own brooms, their own trash bags, coming to clean up. I've seen multiple organizations sprout up who are providing mutual aid. 612 MASH, which is an organization that is deeply connected to George

Floyd Square has treated multiple violent wounds, gunshot wounds in the neighborhood. And this is just a community organization, a group of medical professionals who have come together to intervene and so, so much is going to be possible as we continue to resource and believe in each other.

LAURA FLANDERS: So it'll take more than a year to transform policing in Minneapolis. Why am I not surprised? We're talking not just about institutions of policing but a whole lot else besides. Abolition is a process, says the abolitionist Mariame Kaba. I've been reading her for an upcoming episode. And she writes, when you say what would we do without prisons, what you're really saying is what would we do without civil deaths, exploitation and state sanctioned violence? It's an old question she says, and the answer remains the same. What would we do, anything. Wouldn't we do anything to create a different society? And if we would do anything, shouldn't we start immediately and do whatever it takes at least to begin the process? I'm Laura Flanders, 'til the next time, stay kind, stay curious and thanks for joining us.

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