

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

BLACK JOURNALISTS ON POLICE VIOLENCE: REPORTING FROM THE GROUND UP

LAURA FLANDERS: Police killings in the US continue to mount. According to the Washington Post database, 2022 was the worst year on record. And the rate in 2023 is on track to be worse. Police killed 141 people in this country in just the first seven weeks. 141 people, disproportionately young and Black. The demographics don't change and nothing much else seems to either. The outrage typically wanes before the conversation, let alone the policy change can get very deep. This time in our monthly feature, meet the BIPOC Press with URL Media. We're going to focus on two events, just weeks apart. The police killing of Tyre Nichols in Memphis, after a traffic stop in the low crime middle income neighborhood where he lived. And by Georgia State Police, the killing of queer environmental activist, Manuel Esteban Paez Terán, during a police raid on an encampment of activists opposing what's been called Cop City, a proposed \$90 million police training complex in the Weelaunee forest on the Atlanta City outskirts. Distinct in lots of ways, are there also ways these stories connect? And is there anything in the response that might deepen how we think about power and race, racism, and police, and public safety? For this conversation, I'm joined by my colleague, Sara Lomax, co-founder of URL Media, a network of Black and Brown independent media outlets, and the president and CEO of WURD Radio, Pennsylvania's only African-American owned talk radio station. And with us two reporters who've been on these stories from the ground, from Capital B in Atlanta, Gavin Godfrey. Atlanta editor and Report for America Corps member, Brittany Brown, a reporter at MLK50 Justice Through Journalism, where she covers criminal justice, and labor in Memphis, Tennessee. Let me start with you, Sara. It's the first time we're seeing each other this year, so far. How is it going for you? And welcome back.

SARA LOMAX: So far, so good. It's great to be here with you, Laura. And I know this is going to be a very dynamic conversation.

LF: Gavin, turning to you for starters. A SWAT team, one guy dead, 19 charged with domestic terrorism, an emergency declared, national troops involved. And yet I feel like before we even get to the quality of the coverage, we need to speak to the quantity. I don't think the story of what happened there in Atlanta, what continues to be going on around Cop City is getting the attention it deserves. And certainly we don't know half of it. So can you fill us in, really, on what happened and where things stand?

GAVIN GODFREY: To take it back a little bit, after the social unrest in the wake of George Floyd's murder, the death of Rayshard Brooks here in Atlanta, the Atlanta Police Department had a real issue with morale. They were losing officers. At the same time, the public, the community

of Atlanta wanted both more, police officer accountability, but also we did want, more in the way of public safety. Crime was a big issue and still is in Atlanta. So behind the scenes, even before that, there was talk of creating a new police training center for Atlanta police officers. And so what you have now is, what our mayor is saying and a lot of lawmakers are saying is a response to creating this nice, new, shiny facility that will help boost morale for those officers, right? But in turn, for the community, it's supposed to allegedly, boost the training that will increase officer accountability, right? And so this facility was built, as you mentioned, it's a 90 million dollar facility, 30 million of which comes from taxpayer dollars. And when the ball started rolling to actually start construction on this, over a thousand people reached out to the city council directly and called. And roughly 70% of those calls were people in opposition of the construction of this facility. And so, in the midst of all of that, you had a group of organizers, protestors, taking up, or I could say setting up shop really in the South River Forest where this is located. Southeast Atlanta in South DeKalb County, southeast of the city I should say, but in South DeKalb County. And they were creating a community there, living in tree houses. They even had a makeshift kitchen that they were using, and operating out of to just, as they said, protest the destruction of this forest, first and foremost. But secondly, of course, in opposition of what they saw was a militarization of the police force in Atlanta.

LF: How long has the protest been going on?

GG: The forest dwellers started, I believe they first started setting up shop around two years ago, 2021. And so they've been there for a couple years. And in that time you've had different clashes. And again, just like what's happening with the shooting, it's a very much, this side says this, this side says this. There's been clashes between police who've done previous sweep operations of this area to try to clear these folks out of there. And confrontations have happened where allegedly protestors threw Molotov cocktails, threw rocks at officers. And as you mentioned, that led to the 19 arrests, total, that have happened in over the course of these clashes. So it's been ongoing for a while.

LF: In this particular case, you've got an allegation that there was an officer wounded by a bullet that they claim came from Terán's pistol. What do we know, and was there video footage?

GG: When the incident first happened, the narrative that was relayed to the press, and to the public was that, Paez Terán had actually fired a gun at these officers who were doing a sweep, trying to clear out the area. And that he shot first, these state troopers and other, it was a large collection of different agencies out there, returned fire and an independent autopsy from their family showed that they were hit 13 times. And so, again, the narrative is that Terán fired first, they returned fire and immediately after, activists and Stop Cop City protestors were asking for body camera footage, first from the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, State Troopers. Typically in Georgia, that footage is not readily available, which is what they came out and told us. But then

also the Atlanta Police Department was called upon a share video as well. And they at first said, this isn't available. And then out of nowhere, they seemingly just released four different videos. We really broke down in our covers, the one 40 minute clip. But in that clip, you hear a lot, you don't see anything in terms of the interaction that led to Paez Terán's death. So, it honestly raised a lot more questions than answers. But you see both sides of the argument. The lawmakers, our mayor, our governor saying, "We're being transparent, here's what you wanted." And on the other side of the folks are saying, "Well, this actually shows, or pokes holes in the narrative that Terán shot first."

SL: Brittany, you are a reporter for MLK50 in Memphis. It's a Black media outlet. And I'm really curious, the Tyre Nichols case has gotten national, probably international coverage, but what don't we know that you all, who are on the ground, a Black media outlet that are covering this issue in a much more nuanced way. What are some of the things that we aren't hearing that you all know about and can cover uniquely through MLK50?

BRITTANY BROWN: Yeah, well, I mean, we're really focused on that ongoing effort that we're seeing come from the community, that we're seeing come from protestors, and community organizers. Immediately in the aftermath of the killing of Tyre Nichols we saw national media parachute into Memphis, really covering the flashpoint moment that this was for the city. And now that national media interest has waned right now, MLK50 we're really focused on highlighting the continuing efforts that are going on. Every week there are a handful of events, whether it's protests, or direct action events, or healing events, because the killing of Tyre Nichols, unfortunately, is not the only trauma that Memphians are reeling with and trying to get through and cope with right now. We're focusing our energy on what organizers, what community members, what protestors are saying they want to see from the city council, from the county commission, real solutions. They're really standing firm in the fact that, they want Tyre Nichols' death to be the last death at the hands of Memphis police. And so they're working diligently to try to put forth solutions that will really bring that standard to life.

LF: Brittany, I was very struck that you had done a lot of interviews with other Black men who had had similar experiences in traffic stops to Tyre's. What did you learn in that? And then the other thing that's just so strikes me is that what we constantly hear, and I think you've been reporting on there in Memphis, are these calls for more training. And yet it's a police training center that is the context in which this other killing just took place in Atlanta. But first, what did you find, and were those people who'd had similar experiences, reluctant to talk to you? Hard to find?

BB: No, not hard to find, just because of how regular that practice is of MPD targeting and harassing, or making Black men and other people of color, feel uncomfortable during police stops. They weren't necessarily reluctant to talk about it, but I knew going into these

conversations, I really wanted to turn on that trauma informed reporting. Just because I didn't want to go in and re-traumatize them. I knew that the things they were going to be talking about to me, were very, very difficult moments. And so I made sure I set the table. And asked questions, let them know, shared informed consent with them, let them know, like, "Hey, this is how your story will be used. This is where it will be published. People will read it." Make sure that people understand fully what it is that I'm here to gather and collect in my reporting. But once the table is set, then the conversation just flows naturally. And in my interviews, I take a very personal and human approach to it. I get emotional as I'm hearing these stories, as the folks are sharing their experiences with me and having visceral reactions. I also have a visceral reaction with that because it's just not easy things to talk about, easy things to hear, write about. And so I just approach it like a human. I approach it like a person. And also, they know who we are. They know the MLK50 is here. They know that we are in the community. It was very eye-opening to just hear that pattern of how people feel targeted by police here in Memphis.

LF: Do you think more training will help? And I want to come to you on that too, Gavin. But first, Brittany, this talk of training, training, training, when it's a training center in Atlanta, that's the heart of the dispute there.

BB: In 2020, in Memphis, in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, the city also enacted different reforms and policies that were supposed to prevent an incident like this happening in Memphis. Police actually has the policy in place, called 8CantWait. And it's eight deescalation techniques whenever there's an excessive use of force. Obviously they did not follow those 8CantWait techniques.

LF: What about your take on that question, Gavin?

GG: What we've seen in some studies, especially in our reporting, is that more training, does not necessarily lead to less violent interactions between the community and police. And I think a lot of skepticism around this particular facility is that, it's a training center that has, it's going to have burn towers with smoke billowing out. It's going to have a gun range where there's this firing going all of the time. And the community aspect, the fact that, how they're trying to sell it as, how it's going to improve the training is that, "Oh, well it's going to be a community center. It's going to be open to the public. There will be facilities on site that the public can visit." But that ignores the fact that in that area where it's located, it's predominantly Black, that just means more police are going to be there. And that just honestly, from people we've spoken to through our reporting, they're terrified by that. It gives them mental and emotional distress seeing that presence. They're very skeptical about, if the training facility really will speak to that aspect of it, that community policing, since the community had very little input. And residents we've spoken to have said that they have not been informed by either the city, which owns the land, or DeKalb County, where the land is actually located. So the DeKalb County CEO, Michael Thurmond, and

Atlanta Mayor, Andre Dickens, have had a pretty tough time responding to a lot of questions, and honestly anger from the public, because they were not seeing the correlation, between this massive facility and how it will not lead to more Rayshard Brooks's happening.

SL: One of the things we find within the URL Network, because we are a network of Black and Brown media organizations, we are deeply embedded and connected with our communities. And the things that we cover are also the things that are happening in our lives. It's very closely connected. And so I wanted to find out from both of you, what are some of the things that you are doing to take care of yourselves as you cover these incredibly traumatic stories?

BB: My editor, first and foremost, especially after the night that we covered the protests. And we were out there occupying the I55 bridge with protestors, the next day my editor gave me a call and was like, "Hey, you need to take a couple days off, get some rest. You've been working a lot of overtime." And so there's really that firm understanding, and the mental toll that this type of coverage can happen, because like you said, Sara, it's not just things that we're covering, but these are things that are happening to our own communities that we're experiencing, and living through as well. So we have a lot of conversation just going through our emotions, and our feelings, and our thoughts. We're a really small, close-knit team, so we have that space to really process things together as a team.

SL: How about you. Gavin.

GG: I'm glad Brittany said that about setting boundaries, because I have a team, a very small team too, of reporters and I constantly remind them like, "We're human, but our job is not natural," right? We are running to trauma. We're for better or worse, sometimes looking at footage that most people don't want to look at. And to that point, I will say we did a great report on, once the Tyre Nichols videos were announced they were going to be released, we wrote a story about why you don't necessarily have to watch them, right? Even if you are a journalist, there are ways to manage some of that. To Brittany's point, Capital B is just very driven by community voices. I think what separates our coverage from local coverage in the city is that we are trying to find out how this affects the people that are the most affected, right? Most of our local news is talking to officials, law enforcement officials, and then getting a couple quotes and clips from protestors without a lot of context. And so, I just remind my team, whenever you need a minute, whenever we need a minute. It's okay to take a break, because what we're doing is very important. But at the same time, I want them to feel confident, and also just safe.

SL: There's been conversation about the power dynamics with institutions like the police, whether you're Black or white, inflicted upon Black bodies. But when you look at the discipline and the treatment of the officers when they are Black, as opposed to white, that becomes another question around, does that mean that our criminal justice reform efforts are working and we are

getting better outcomes around police brutality? Or is that just another example of a racialized dynamic at play when the officers are Black? Because when you look at George Floyd, and you can go all the way back to Rodney King, and you see that when there are white officers, it is a much different case in terms of how they're disciplined. So I wanted to see if both of you could speak to that dynamic, Gavin?

GG: You could arguably just say the entire notion, or organizational police in American history was built on white supremacy. To suppress usually Black votes back at the time. So the idea that Black men can't be implicit in white supremacy, we know that's not true. We actually have a story out on Capital B today that says, the Black cop will not save you in that sense. And that what needs to change is systemic change, right? They are Black or white living, or working in a system that is geared toward using these type of tactics that often lead to people being seriously injured, or dead.

SL: Do you think that the way that they they were disciplined is different because they're Black?

BB: I think it's 'both...and' is my response. And let's set the table here a little bit about what's actually been going on in Memphis for the past year now. We're just on the other side of electing a new district attorney, DA Steve Mulroy, who's the first democratic attorney in Shelby County, the first democratic DA in decades. And before DA Mulroy was in office, we had a Republican district attorney who, during her tenure for a decade or so, she never charged an officer in any type of misconduct, or excessive use of force, or shooting, or anything like that. And so what we're seeing is not necessarily just a response from the police department, but a response from the city, and the county at large with a new district attorney bringing forth those charges immediately. With a Black police chief. And she often says that she understands the community's pain as a Black woman and all of those things. However, when that response happened, when they were immediately fired, when they were immediately charged, I was not only thinking like, "Okay, well this action was swift, because they're Black, right? But also this action was swift, so it must be really, really bad." And as we saw the video, it was.

LF: I want to ask both of you about the consent and democracy aspect of this. We all say it's about public safety, right? But you just told us that in Atlanta, 70% of all those who testified about their opinions on this training center, Cop City, were against it, but it's going ahead anyway. I guess I'm just constantly reminded of abolitionist, Mariame Kaba, who says, "We need to be asking different, better questions." What better question, Gavin?

GG: That's a great question, I mean, to your point about the people who responded and were in opposition, our mayor just released a survey that says that residents actually want it, 69%. Well, what they don't tell you is that they had a 2% response rate, this survey that was put out and 600 people, or just over 600 people responded. We have no idea what the make up of those folks are.

And so, one question I would just like to ask our mayor, "What, are you listening," right? I think it's been very clear that this is a very divisive issue, but also it's not so cut and dry in that, I'm the guy who helps make policy. The city want this policy to have accountability for the police. This is what that looks like to me, which shows our lawmakers aren't listening to what residents want out of that policy. What they would like to see. Talk is cheap, as we say. And I think people are just tired of hearing that this is going to be a great thing. They want to see it in practice. And a long time ago, Atlanta, was a little more well known for some of its community policing efforts, and we've gotten away from that. So, I think the biggest question I want to ask is, "Are you listening to the people? And how are you facilitating?" To Brittany's point, are there incidents happening in the city where we're trying to organize, and heal together, and talk about this? There's still no dialogue. It's they said, he said, she said. And I would just like to ask, "Why aren't we talking together with each other about this, instead of at each other?"

LF: Brittany.

BB: For me, the better question to ask is why are we, and this is a collective we, continuing to bend over backwards and contort our minds, and bodies, to normalize this ongoing system of violence. Clearly it is a system that only wields violence toward people as we see. And the trend is going up and up and up. And it's not a solution, that is not what public safety is. And I think it's okay, and actually should be normal, especially in media to understand that this is not normal. This is not bringing forth safety for anyone. If entire communities are living in fear of police, then that means something is not working. And it's time that we start reporting and asking questions in that way, not from a vantage point of police are the solution to everything, but why are people feeling this way? If we take a look back at history, I just want to quote just something that I read in a book by historian, Elizabeth Hinton. The book is titled "America On Fire." And it takes a look back at the uprisings in this country. And places it in this historical perspective of how the police changed to respond to uprisings across this country, primarily Black uprisings. And so what we know about Memphis is then in 1968, Dr. King was assassinated here. After his assassination, cities were in uprising across the country. Immediately after those waves of uprisings, we saw increased funding to police, increased militarization of police. And so what we're seeing right now of this over militarization of police is the direct legacy of the police being used as a force to quell Black rebellion and Black uprising to this ongoing state violence.

SL: It's so powerful that we're having this conversation with MLK50, and Capital B, and me, WURD Radio. Three Black media outlets that are continuing a tradition of covering issues in very nuanced and complex ways for our communities. There are many issues that only we can cover, because context really matters. And our communities need to have outlets, and voices, and perspectives that are coming directly from the ground up and from our people. I'm disheartened in many ways that we are having to tell the same story. I mean, Mamie Till had a position to show her son's battered, brutalized body. Emmett Till's body as a way to a calling to the nation.

And an awakening to the nation. And similarly, Tyre Nichol's mother was like, "Yes, I want the video of his beating made public, because we need to have massive change." And so it's disheartening on one hand, but I think that the work that we're doing to bring visibility to these issues in different ways is incredibly important.

LF: Well, I want to thank you once again, Sara, for convening a fantastic conversation today. And I want to remind our audience that if they want to show some love to those who are doing this reporting, they can find out how at our website, and yours. Brittany, Gavin, thank you. And thank you for doing this difficult work. We send you much appreciation and love for your kindness and your curiosity. And Sara, see you again in a month or two. I look forward to it.

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