

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

POWER GRIDS UNDER ATTACK: THE THREAT IS DOMESTIC TERRORISM – NOT DRAG ARTISTS

LAURA FLANDERS: It was the biggest domestic terror attack on the US electricity system that most people have never heard of. When the lights went out in Moore County, North Carolina affecting 45,000 homes and businesses, Sheriff Ronnie Fields, Southern Pines former mayor, immediately declared it an act of vandalism. But by the next day that was upgraded to sabotage, the FBI were involved and by the end of the week, the governor was offering a \$75,000 reward for information leading to an arrest.

SHERIFF RONNIE FIELDS: To the perpetrators out there, we will find you.

REPORTER: Strong words from the Moore County Sheriff after he says someone shot into power substations, leaving tens of thousands in the dark and cold.

REPORTER: The Department of Homeland Security updated its National Threat Assessment bulletin November 30th, sounding the alarm about the potential for attacks on critical infrastructure. The outages have left the community here scrambling and power likely won't be restored fully until Thursday.

LAURA FLANDERS: But it's not as if there weren't suspects here. For weeks ahead of the attack, this place, Southern Pines, was up in arms, but not about the insecurity or vulnerability of our electricity grid. Rather, about a drag show that was happening right here at the Sunrise Theater.

REPORTER: In Southern Pines, protestors started rallying and calling for prayer and counter protestors started protesting the protestors. It was peaceful, signs and chanting and that sort of thing, but it also got heated and angry. And let's not forget about the death threats that came before it. Then, just as the show was getting underway on Saturday, the attack happened. Someone shot the power grid and that blackout spread across the county.

LAURA FLANDERS: Who's creating safety here and who most conspicuously is not? And who's a threat to safety? Everyone's. And why does all of this matter so much? We are here in Moore County, North Carolina to find out. The blackout, December 3rd, 2022 affected some Duke Energy customers for five days causing schools to close the local hospital to switch to generator power, countless farms and businesses to suffer. And one woman, 87-year-old Karen

Zoanelli, who relied on an oxygen machine, to die. This August, her death was ruled a homicide caused by the power outage. The attacks follow a pattern that researchers have been concerned about for years, a sniper attack on a Santa Clara substation in California was caught on surveillance cameras in 2013. A report conducted by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission soon after that attack revealed that disabling just a handful of substations could bring down the entire US grid. The years since have seen a dramatic increase in plots targeting electricity systems, especially since the election defeat of Donald Trump. According to the Department of Energy's tracker, suspicious incidents rose 71% between 2021 and 2022. 13 White Supremacists have been indicted in such cases in this period, 11 since 2020 alone. Those include four North Carolinians, including two former Marines, indicted in connection with a grid attack planned by neo-Nazis in 2021. And two others indicted in February '22 on federal charges of plotting to take down substations around Baltimore. The far right has advocated attacks on the grid and other forms of critical infrastructure as a tactic within a framework called accelerationism, which is intended to bring down government and set off a possible race war. Under regulated online platforms such as Telegram allow these ideas to spread. And this includes the so-called Terrorgram Network, which in July, 2022 released a graphically illustrated zine called "Make It Count, a Guide for the 21st Century Accelerationist." The main thing that keeps the anti-white system going is the power grid, writes the authors, attacking substations, they say, is easier than you think. The lights went out in Moore County just after the "Downtown Divas" show had started at the Sunrise. Erica Street, mother of three, including 16-year-old trans girl, Alex, was in the audience.

ERICA STREET: The police were there keeping everyone safe. They had a large area in between the two protests. And then the show started and we were all excited and we were rip roaring ready to go, and Naomi did maybe one skit and the lights went out.

LAURA FLANDERS: 12 months on, there have been no arrests and the Moore County Sheriff's Office, which is leading the investigation, has announced no suspects except to say that whoever shot up the substations knew exactly what they were doing. Do you feel any safer now than you did a year ago?

ERICA STREET: No, in fact, I felt safe up until then. And now I've been opened up to a whole new world of hate.

LAURA FLANDERS: Erica Street has lived in Moore County all her life.

ERICA STREET: It wasn't the first time that we saw Naomi in action. Just last summer, June of 2022, Sandhills Pride sponsored a drag show in downtown Southern Pines. Naomi brought a couple of her friends. It was an open outdoor drag show. It was family oriented. There were kids there. It was a blast, and of course, I took Alex, it was like, who else am I gonna take? And she

dressed to the nine and she had her shades and her skirt and her heels on, and she got to meet Naomi.

LAURA FLANDERS: Naomi is Naomi Dix, the Durham based drag artist, invited by Sandhills Pride to produce the "Downtown Divas" show. Meeting Naomi was very meaningful for Alex.

ALEX LAFFERTY: It felt like I was a part of something bigger. I was a part of a community that I hadn't really experienced before that 'cause it's like no one at my school, and even at my school now was like super, talked about being queer, other than my very close friends. And so just to feel like I see you, like when you complimented my hair, that was so important to me because that's just like a love your hair, it's like that my hair meant a lot to me.

NAOMI DIX: Yeah.

ALEX LAFFERTY: As a trans woman who had been growing up my hair.

NAOMI DIX: Yeah. One of the important reasons why I continuously kept bringing drag and just not drag, but education and queer education and trans education to this area was because of communities like yourself. I knew that those things existed, and I knew that Moore County, I knew that Southern Pines had such, almost like this vibrant community that had no sort of representation. And I knew that by giving that representation in some shape or form, that it would make others within the community feel safe, but not only feel safe, but more than anything feel heard and feel seen. And I wanted to make sure that if you felt as though you didn't have a voice, that I as a community leader at least, gave you that voice.

LAURA FLANDERS: Dix was backstage when the lights went out.

NAOMI DIX: I was like, wait a minute now I sent this lighting cue and they got it right, but this is a little too long and I'm not sure what's going on. And I think shortly after that, I think a piece of me was like, you know what? I'm wondering if this has anything to do with the hatred that we're getting and that we got because of the show. I think I went into protective mode of, I have all of these people in here, over 300 people in here. I need to do something to make sure that they feel safe and that communication is open and that transparency is there and available. And that's when I went back on stage and I addressed the crowd.

LAURA FLANDERS: In that moment when you're sitting in the theater and everything is dark, were you afraid?

ERICA STREET: I thought, oh, it's just one of those things, the power's out. We all lit our phones up, we started singing. Naomi led us in song, I mean, it was an incredible moment. When I got scared was on the way home when all of the traffic lights were out.

LAURA FLANDERS: Do you remember what that was like or what happened? Because I mean, this was many days of no power.

ALEX LAFFERTY: I couldn't think of anything other than, what is going on? Nothing is happening that is as it should be. This is wrong, you know.

LAURA FLANDERS: Serena Sebring is executive director of the nonprofit Blueprint, North Carolina, the largest coalition of grassroots groups in the state. She received word from her colleagues of the blackout early on the night of December 3rd and drove out to Moore County the next day to help.

SERENA SEBRING: No streetlights were working. There was no one directing traffic. It was very much an eerie scene with no power on in any of the houses that we passed as we came into town. In some ways was a lesson to me about what happens in the case of a massive power outage like that. In a rural county, you have to understand that the wells often operate with electricity. That the gas pumps that we think of as not necessarily relying on electricity, also do. That the hospital was on a backup generator. That there were, just at every level, real dangers associated with this event and a lot of confusion. People generally, even in Moore County, the ones that came to the distribution center hadn't heard about a drag show. They didn't know that there was a controversy about a show or that this was in some way associated with a political conflict. It was just their power was out suddenly in the middle of December and no information was coming from local authorities.

LAURA FLANDERS: Generations of US service personnel have learned how to secure and also how to sabotage infrastructure. North Carolina has a huge active duty military presence and the eighth largest veteran population in the country. Moore County borders Fort Liberty, formerly Fort Bragg home of the 82nd Airborne Division, and the Army Special Forces Command. One former PSYOPs officer based there, US Army Captain Emily Grace Rainey was forced to resign after she led a busload of residents to Washington DC to protest, January 6th. A lead rabble-rouser against Naomi Dix's drag show Rainey celebrated when after weeks of pressure an age limit was slapped on the event. Nonetheless, she called her supporters to stand with her outside the theater on the night of the performance. The lights went out just after the show started. Later that night, a post appeared on Grace Rainey's Facebook page, "The power is out in Moore County and I know why." That earned Rainey a visit from the sheriff's office apparently not to investigate, but to pray, Rainey posted about that too. Elsewhere on Facebook, cheery pictures show Rainey friendly with Sheriff Fields who declared at a press conference the next

day that she was not a suspect in the attacks. Do you think there's a connection between the campaign against the drag show and the taking out of those power stations in Moore County?

SERENA SEBRING: I think that there's at least a narrative connection. We all are awaiting the facts of what exactly happened. But what we do know, even now, is that violent white supremacist rhetoric was used before the show to oppose the show. That there was a call for a reaction to the drag show happening in community. And that the same people who put out that call after the power grid went down, took credit for it. So I think we have to acknowledge that this is a real local domestic terrorist threat. They are predicting, calling for and claiming credit for this act.

LAURA FLANDERS: A year on citizens of Moore County are no longer in the dark, literally, however, when it comes to information about the substation attacks, they have been met with official silence. We asked law enforcement, including the Moore County Sheriff and government officials at all levels to provide us with an update on the investigation. None would, neither would Duke Energy, the multi-billion dollar energy holding company that operates in six states and serves more than 8 million customers. This October, we visited one of the Duke energy substations that was attacked. We're down a little dirt road. There's a chest high fence right there with the sign, Duke Energy West End Substation. But there's not a soul that we could talk to to ask permission or get information about this place. And there may be cameras, but there's no one stopping us from doing pretty much whatever we like right here. We reached one law enforcement officer, Southern Pines Police Chief Nick Polidori on the phone as we were exploring the area with colleagues.

NICK POLIDORI: Have you talked to Moore County Sheriff?

LAURA FLANDERS: Yeah, he turned us, me down this morning. I mean, it's wild. This is a public concern.

NICK POLIDORI: I'll probably be the one turning you down as well, whether it's not my investigation, it's the sheriff's office with the FBI.

LAURA FLANDERS: Yeah.

NICK POLIDORI: And I quite honestly, we've had no interaction with Duke.

LAURA FLANDERS: Do you feel any more secure than you did a year ago?

NICK POLIDORI: I kind of know what you're getting at. I don't wanna make your story because I wouldn't wanna speak out of turn for Duke and for the Sheriff's office and the FBI.

LAURA FLANDERS:What about just speaking as a civilian whose lights went out.

NICK POLIDORI: I was working that night. I remember it.

LAURA FLANDERS: I bet it was frightening.

NICK POLIDORI: It was a different event for us, that's for sure.

LAURA FLANDERS: That's for sure. Well, again, we would truly appreciate to be able to tell the people of Moore County that there has been some serious response to this and there's reason for them to sleep more soundly at night.

NICK POLIDORI: I don't have any information of what Duke has or has not done. So I don't believe I'm the right person to get that.

LAURA FLANDERS: Right, and you're leaving this in the hands of Duke Energy.

NICK POLIDORI: It's not me leaving it in the hands, it's things that I believe they are handling.

LAURA FLANDERS: Yeah. All right. Well I truly appreciate you talking to us Chief. I really do appreciate it and I don't envy your position, but there's a lot of people counting on you.

NICK POLIDORI: I know that. I appreciate your time Miss Flanders.

LAURA FLANDERS: This place, The Pinhook is a place of safety. It was founded to be exactly that by the country music artist Kym Register back in 2008. And ever since, well it's become a celebrated haven for LGBTQI people and their art. We are here for the first ever presentation to an invited few, of a drag opera response to the haters. Grace Nichols, a performer with the House of Coxx, who performs regularly right here at The Pinhook, has been one of the driving forces behind that opera, along with Mab Segrest of Blueprint North Carolina.

TORI GRACE NICHOLS: I grew up overseas on American military bases, and I didn't live in the US until 2008 when my mother retired to southwest Georgia. And I had a really hard time in southwest Georgia. There is a queer community there, but I still just felt really isolated, particularly as a person of color and a person sort of coming into my own transness. And so it felt like these intersections weren't always held or acknowledged the way that I experienced them here in Durham. So I moved from southwest Georgia up to here.

LAURA FLANDERS: So it's heaven for queer people in Durham, North Carolina.

TORI GRACE NICHOLS: Not all people would say that. Every place has its issues, I mean, navigating the intersections of identity are always hard. You know, ableism exists everywhere. Classism exists everywhere, but here at least I think there's at least an effort to try. Let's try to figure out how to be better with and for each other.

LAURA FLANDERS: But for everything that you've just said, the queer community's also been under consistent attack in North Carolina.

TORI GRACE NICHOLS: We aren't the villains in this situation. We have a right to exist and be performing. And what I love about drag is the joy that we bring not only to LGBT people, but the whole community. Synopsis, a young trans person seeks courage and community after a nefarious attack on a drag show in their small rural town in North Carolina. Community members rally together to support one another and fight back against fascism. There's always a spirit of acceptance and celebration at our shows. So, we shouldn't be scared to do that. And if people are trying to make us feel scared, then that's on them. The stage directions simply say, lights up on Charlie in front of her vanity. She is being interviewed by a journalist. The journalist says, 'What is drag?'

STORMIE DAIE: Drag is an illusion, delusions, audacity, possibility, your truest self, most untrue self, delightful contradiction. Drag is armor, war paint. You want to talk about strength, heels, duct tape, wig, glue, eyelashes, five pounds of hair clips on, earrings, a corset and a tuck into splits. And for whom and for what? For y'all. Drag is service. Talk about serving, giving, living. Don't talk to me about strength, serving, salvation, none of that. We don't need to be saved. We save people. You want to talk about surviving in a world that wants you dead? Then you can talk to me about strength. Talk to me about joy, about love, celebration. Talk to me about passion.

LAURA FLANDERS: Serena Sebring of Blueprint, North Carolina was present at the opera reading.

SERENA SEBRING: The drag opera is gonna be a really powerful storytelling tool to help folks in Moore County to have conversations about what happened there and far beyond. To educate people in all the counties of North Carolina about what threats to community safety can look like and what healing and restoration and power building can look like in its wake. We are talking about a great harm that happened here in North Carolina, but this is a national problem and not a new one. There are extremist groups, violent extremist groups like Atomwaffen and others who have been targeting the United States power grid for some years. They've produced a manual for how to take out these substations. And the reality is that two substations taken out resulted in power gone for 45,000 households here. The right nine power stations taken out,

would wipe out the entire United States power grid for everybody. This is a domestic terrorist threat that people really need to be paying attention to.

LAURA FLANDERS: Back in Moore County, Erica Street, says, the events of last December were transformative.

ERICA STREET: I feel like that was a turning point in our community, that entire show and that entire incident, because it really brought out two different sets of people. It brought out the lovers and it brought out the haters. The haters thought, oh, this is our opportunity. This is our foot in the door to really pound this county. And those haters have found a way to attack our youth through the school board and our communities and our schools-

ALEX LAFFERTY: Infringing upon the right of human, it's infringing upon my right.

ERICA STREET: And it was at that point that Alex and I spoke out at the school board when they wanted to pass the Parents' Bill of Rights.

LAURA FLANDERS: During the 2023 session North Carolina lawmakers passed one bill, increasing the penalties for damaging utility property and three anti-trans bills. Denying medical care to trans youth, prohibiting trans youth from participating in school sports and SB 49, a so-called Parents' Bill of Rights.

ERICA STREET: Parents' Bill of Rights said to teachers that they must tell the parents if their child goes by different pronouns or by different names. And for kids who are just socially out, that is everything. That's how Alex started, and just using her right pronouns and using her right name would light up her world, you know? Unfortunately, very conservative county, the Parents' Bill of Rights was passed and at that point, a couple of moms and I said, we need to do something and so we started the PFLAG.

LAURA FLANDERS: Alex testified against the Parents' Bill of Rights at a school board meeting.

ALEX LAFFERTY: My name is Alex Lafferty and I know where things like this lead. History rhymes like bad poetry. I kept repeating, my name is Alex Lafferty and I'm a human being 'cause that was what I thought was important. I thought that you can't keep telling the same people, oh, it's basic human rights when they don't see you as human.

LAURA FLANDERS: Do you feel like anything's changed as a response to what happened a year ago?

ALEX LAFFERTY: I remember thinking, I have to start speaking more. I have to start speaking out more. I have to start sticking up for me, myself, and the trans community more, because that's what prevents things like this is all of us thinking, 'I'm gonna do more'.

NAOMI DIX: Before this event, there was so much, this shouldn't happen and that shouldn't happen. We shouldn't have these people, these drag artists coming here because they're putting our children in danger. And these people are not Christian. And Naomi Dix is a demonic person and all of these things. And yet when the lights went out, it didn't matter who was Black, who was Latino, who was Asian, who was a person of color, it did not matter. Didn't matter if you were Catholic, if you were Baptist, if you were Christian, whatever that was, we were all in the same space, all in the same boat, which was, we didn't have any power. We all are just one type of person in that moment, and we're all just trying to help each other.

LAURA FLANDERS: It takes a lot to scare a drag queen, but perhaps the rest of us could do with being just a little bit more afraid. Our society is facing very real threats, some of which can be identified even if they can't be specifically named. And every minute, every hour, every day that we allow ourselves to be distracted by fake threats we do that at our peril. As the people of Moore County, North Carolina discovered when the lights go out, they go out for everybody and they leave us and our democracy in darkness. From North Carolina, I'm Laura Flanders for "The Laura of Flanders Show." Till the next time, stay kind, stay curious, and thanks for joining me.

For more on this episode and other forward-thinking content, subscribe to our free newsletter for updates, my commentaries and our full uncut conversations. We also have a podcast. It's all at lauraflanders.org.

Correction: Sheriff Ronnie Fields is the former mayor of Carthage, not Southern Pines. The Laura Flanders Show deeply regrets the error.