

LAURA FLANDERS & FRIENDS

HOW TO BREAK THE “CYCLE” OF POLICE KILLING? LISTEN TO SURVIVORS.

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LAURA FLANDERS: It is a theme we return to repeatedly on this program. Which lives and which deaths matter? And how does the way we ask and answer that question affect us, individually, and as a society? On June 15th, 2019, in Racine, Wisconsin, 18-year-old Ty'rese West was shot to death after being pulled over by a police officer from a nearby area, ostensibly for riding a bicycle with no headlights. The African American teen died on the same day that his community celebrated Juneteenth, the holiday marking the end of slavery. And perhaps for that very reason, details of his killing were initially withheld from his family and the public and cut from the police report. But West's life and the circumstances of his death did matter, among others, to Racine natives, Laura Dyan Kezman and William Howell. A year before the police murder of George Floyd focused national attention on systemic police violence, they undertook a multi-year investigation to find out what actually happened to West and to cover the lawsuit that followed his killing. The result is "CYCLE," a mesmerizing documentary, which the directors describe as an invitation to, "Interrupt the silence that follows so many cases that never go viral. Cases where there is no footage, no public pressure, and no accountability." [Check out the trailer](#), which is getting its broadcast premiere right here, for "CYCLE." With me now is director [Laura Dyan Kezman](#), and co-director [William Howell](#). Kezman's an award-winning director and video journalist, a contributor to the Washington Post, among others, and to the founder of LionArt Media. Howell is a cinematographer, editor, and director based in Milwaukee. He was the cinematographer of "The Rise and Fall of CoCo Cal," and the director of the 2020 film, "You Don't Know Me." Welcome both to Laura Flanders & Friends and thank you for your truly powerful and important work. I have to start with you, Laura, and ask you, you know, what brought this story of Ty'rese West to your attention? Why focus here and just how long you have been working on this film?

LAURA DYAN KEZMAN: "CYCLE" has been a six year journey for both Will and I, that started tragically the night of June 15th in 2019. And I'm originally from Racine where the story takes place, as is Will. The story was brought to my attention through a friend who then became a producer on the film who told me the details of what had happened that fateful night where her and I happened to be in Racine that night, driving past the crime scene, not knowing what had happened. And it was months later, because I live in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, which is only 30 minutes north of Racine and the news of Ty'rese hadn't even reached Milwaukee. And so his name wasn't even familiar to me three months after the fact. And at that point, Will had been

covering the story solo just with his camera in Racine and documenting the devastation to the community at that time.

LAURA FLANDERS: So let me come to you, William. I mean, when did this story begin for you? When did your relationship perhaps with Ty'rese begin?

WILLIAM HOWELL: Ty'rese's father and I, we were like very close friends when we were around that age, you know, in middle school. And so as soon as I'd seen Ty'rese's picture and what people need to understand, is that even though Juneteenth Day is a national holiday now, and it is celebrated on the 19th, in Racine, Wisconsin, it was always celebrated on June 15th. And so this incident took place on that very day. And so for all of us, it was just very touching and very tragic. And so for me, like I said, it was just an immediate call-to-action.

LAURA FLANDERS: And why "CYCLE?" What's the cycle of the title?

WILLIAM HOWELL: Well, "CYCLE" came because, of course Ty'rese, he was a originally being stopped because he was on a a bicycle without a light. And, we also wanted to look at the bigger picture, this cycle of police brutality on African Americans in America that just continues to happen. And to take a smaller story like Ty'rese's, because nobody really knows his name, nobody really knows Racine even exists, and to be able to tie it into the bigger picture, was very vital for us.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, you did it brilliantly and you reveal a lot, among other things, you reveal who has power in these situations.

- EDGAR LIN: Most people think that judges are the most powerful actors in the criminal justice system. They're not. The most powerful actors in the criminal justice system are the police and the district attorney. The police craft the narrative that goes to the district attorney's office. They are the fact gatherers.

- JAMIE MCCLENDON: When there's a law enforcement involved shooting, the officer that is involved with the police shooting, their department is not the department that actually does the investigation. But there really isn't any standard protocol.

- EDGAR LIN: They have the discretion to include things in the report or not include things in the report.

LAURA FLANDERS: That was a clip from the film "CYCLE," the feature documentary. The core of this story, Laura, is that the narrative took so long to emerge and was so clearly defined by the police version. Can you lay out how you came to dig into the facts to figure out what

actually happened and how what you discovered did or didn't conform with what the police was saying?

LAURA DYAN KEZMAN: Absolutely. Well, first and foremost there was, the community and the family was met with silence from officials in Racine after this happened. There was not even a press conference held to address the community or to even acknowledge Ty'rese's death. And that is very critical as we also refer back to the 16 hours that it took the police department to even notify Monique West that her son Ty'rese was killed. It took 96 days for the district attorney in Racine to announce her charging decision. And when that day happened, it was covered quite a bit locally in Racine. And there were hundreds of people in the community waiting on the courthouse steps for that announcement. When the district attorney announced that she would not be pressing charges against the officer, which I think, you know, deep down most people expected that. But it was really what came later, which was the West family filed a civil suit just two months after the decision to not charge the officer happened. And so it was at that point that I came on the project. We teamed up with the Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism that helped sort of guide the early stage of our investigation. And it was only then that we started, you know, receiving access to documents that previously had not been made public.

WILLIAM HOWELL: Racine is very integrated and just, we all grow up together, a lot of different nationalities and things like that. And so when we grew up, we never saw the police as a threat, which was, to me, I think was rather shocking. The biggest shock to me was just more of the, probably like the political side of the officers and the relationships that have to take place when something like this happens. And then you have those relationships that kind of muddy the waters.

LAURA FLANDERS: 2019 is when this killing happened. On the night that your town was celebrating the Juneteenth holiday, the killing of George Floyd is the next year. And when we're talking cycles, I think many of us thought that if ever there was going to be a moment where the cycle of the relationship between the police and people of color in this country could be changed, it could be in the wake of that killing, where we learn a lot about the history and the current ubiquity of the violence and the numbers that you're talking about. And we also learned about the reality that officers like Derek Chauvin in the George Floyd case have often histories of violence that they're trailing into their current position. It was the same in the situation that you reported on Laura, and there's another mother in addition to Monique who appears in your film very powerfully. That's Nancy Kowalczyk. Can you talk about her and her experience and why you felt it was so important to include her?

LAURA DYAN KEZMAN: Absolutely. So the parallel between Nancy Kowalczyk and Monique West was not an obvious one. Nancy Kowalczyk is the mother of Michael Kowalczyk, who was brutally beaten by the same officer six years prior to this officer, Eric Giese, killing Ty'rese.

Nancy Kowalczyk had approached both the Mount Pleasant and the Racine Police Chiefs warning them about Eric Giese specifically, because one thing that is highlighted in the film is how nearly impossible it is to request an officer's disciplinary record. And so in the absence of that being public information, Nancy took it upon herself to warn the community, essentially, about this officer who they had witnessed, again, brutally beat their son in front of them with no remorse. And then, you know, and then all of the ensuing charges that happened after that. But essentially she was saying this officer was going to kill someone someday. At least remove him from having a public facing position.

LAURA FLANDERS: And this was one of the issues that was addressed in that period after the killing of George Floyd. It was one of the reforms that people nationally thought had been put in place. There was a national database for the first time ever tracking the police behavior and accountability

WILLIAM HOWELL: For as long as we've been living, we've been taught that the police have this power to do what they want and that there's nothing that we can do. And then a lot of these people that you're talking about, they're felons or they've broken the law before and so they feel the need to hide away from these injustices. And so a lot of times, like I said, there's no answers. And so for me, that's why "CYCLE" is so vital and what Laura was able to do with this film, and not just telling Ty'rese's story, but telling the story of Black America within the confines of his story, because she's able to tell the story of Monique West, the story of the West children, the story of William, and these are the things that we never see when we hear these names, even when a name becomes famous. And so for me, I think it becomes a guide for people to really actually be able to focus on and to say like, this is what we need to do in these situations. Because, before "CYCLE," we've never had that. And it was the same reason why I told Laura when we connected that I would not make this film because it would just be an angry film and I would be leaving our people with the exact same sentiments that we've always had, and that doesn't cause change. And so, yes, "CYCLE," took six years to make, but I would rather it take six years and last for 60, than to just have a, you know, a microwavable piece of work that has already been eaten and consumed and nobody cares about.

LAURA FLANDERS: So what changed?

WILLIAM HOWELL: We had this mutual friend to kind of just connect us and then she sent me a link to watch that was Laura's documentary. And when I saw this work, when I tell you I knew this was God speaking to me. And so when me and Laura was able to connect and sit in this coffee shop, for me, it was like all of a sudden I was looking at this white woman. And no matter how much I prayed, I never prayed to God to send me a Black man, a Black woman. I probably wouldn't care if she was blue, but it was so shocking to me and just so out, you know, it just wasn't a normal thing. And I would often tell her that like, this just doesn't feel real to me,

because finally it was like somebody who got it, because that was kind of my call to action. You know, even when I was online a lot, I was saying like, we need good white people. Like this doesn't work with just us caring. Like we need good white people who care, who can see from a standpoint of they're not blocked by their anger and their resentment and all of these things that have already taken place. And so even when you have Black men who are educated and they are healed, per se, whatever people, like even you find yourself, you only have a limit of so much that you can take before it, it just, it takes you to a place of just anger. And so for Laura to be able to step in and constantly see things from just a bigger perspective, a bigger viewpoint, which is what you need sometimes, but to still culturally care, to culturally connect with you and never leave your pain on the table as if it didn't matter.

LAURA FLANDERS: What was your strategy for creating a film that isn't just about anger and loss, but something else, that makes people care? And what role did Monique play in that? Was she willing to participate from the get go?

LAURA DYAN KEZMAN: So, I mean, the first time I met Monique, she greeted me with a big hug, as did the entire family. And that relationship would not have been built without the foundation that Will already had made. The trust that they had in Will that extended to the trust that they then showed me, Will, I mean, vouched for me. To your question of like, how do you make the film something that isn't angry, that isn't the intuitive emotional response that so much of us have in response to when someone is atrociously killed by police and it's documented and you hear about it and it becomes, you know, an easier, convenient bandwagon to jump on, especially in the social media atmosphere. But when Ty'rese was killed, there wasn't any of that because there wasn't video and there wasn't audio and he didn't become a hashtag that went viral. And he represents all of the names and all of the [victims of police violence](#) that never get a platform. You know, we started this film in 2019, and you know, it started with the intention of like, yes, not making an angry film, but it was, we didn't quite know what the film needed to be yet. [And then COVID hit](#) and then Ahmaud Arbery was killed and then Breonna Taylor was killed, and then George Floyd was killed. And we felt it then, that this was something so much bigger than us in terms of us telling Ty'rese's story in that moment. We knew that it was something that was going to evolve into something far beyond our comprehension at that time.

LAURA FLANDERS: And what can you tell us about the experience you're having with the film now that it's out there in the world, William?

WILLIAM HOWELL: The connection that people feel is just amazing and the call to action, you know, that's what I see more than anything, that we achieved our goal. That people are not leaving these theaters angry. No, they're leaving it saying, what can we do? What can I do? What can we do together as people to help create this change? And I think for me, like that's just been

the most just heartwarming thing and the reason why I think that God overall took his time with this project and with us.

LAURA FLANDERS: Laura, I heard a story that there had been some amazing things coming out of your screenings, none more amazing than the response of new caring for Nancy Kowalczyk's son.

LAURA DYAN KEZMAN: Yes, we had a special homecoming premiere in Racine. We were able to host it in the high school theater, you know, in the halls that Tyrese once walked. It was his former high school. And we had over 300 people come and experience the film in the shadow of where the story takes place. And Nancy Kowalczyk was there that day with her family and there was someone in the audience who connected her with resources from Michael that up to this point, you know, almost 12 years after Michael was originally beaten by Eric Giese, he's been living, you know, in pain without the resources that he needs for this entire time. And they were able to connect and put him in a group home that is supplying him with all of the care and attention that he needs, which are very specialized now. And Nancy called me in tears telling me that, that Michael is now in this safe place for the first time in 12 years. And that was because of this connection that was made the day of our homecoming screening.

LAURA FLANDERS: I guess I would end by asking you, you've hinted at it. In what ways do you think you've been changed by this experience? William and Laura, William first?

WILLIAM HOWELL: Well, for me, when I came into this experience and when I was, I wasn't a filmmaker, I was literally just like this local videographer and I wanted to make music videos and through something like this I've learned to understand just the power in these stories and the power in documentary filmmaking and just being able to also take this process to be able to learn and understand, you know, the traumas that we deal with just personally as Black men and just learning to correct my own self and trying to correct another man. Like I said, you just learn to correct yourself. And so that's the, I think that's the biggest thing that I've been able to learn through this entire thing is that there's cycles within all of us. And so when you start to break cycles like it, you know, you want to make that a habit.

LAURA FLANDERS: Wisdom there. Laura, what about you? How were you changed in all this?

LAURA DYAN KEZMAN: It really felt, in a lot of ways, like I was just the vessel that this story had to come through. And in this six-year journey, it was redefining the way that I listen, in how you construct a story and the sanctity of people's truth and getting it right in a way that resonates universally. And so it has completely redefined the way that I view filmmaking and what I do. And I just hope that the resonance can, or the reverberation can continue far beyond right now.

LAURA FLANDERS: So Laura Dyan Kezman and William Howell, thank you so much for being with me and for "CYCLE." It's been a pleasure to spend some time with you. Thanks for your work.

WILLIAM HOWELL: Thank you.

LAURA DYAN KEZMAN: Thank you, Laura.

LAURA FLANDERS: Which deaths matter? Well, let's face it. Had Hurricane Melissa been headed for Washington DC, it would've received way more attention than that historic storm received, as it devastated parts of Jamaica and Haiti in the Dominican Republic and Cuba. And Melissa's not the only Caribbean catastrophe that is not receiving the attention that it should. [What else is going on there?](#) Just south and east of Melissa's flood path, a catastrophe wrought not by climate, but by our president's own personal actions. That's right. Donald Trump since September has ordered attacks on more than 15 vessels in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific, killing at current count over 60 people. He says they're narco traffickers, but we've seen no evidence, no ceased cargo, no arrests. The president's disobeying U.S. law, refusing to address Congress on this question. He's disobeying international law too. What do we know? Well, we know tens of thousands of troops are massed and warships and fighter jets and nuclear-capable submarines. And now he's talking about invasion. So is a hurricane worthy of our attention? Absolutely. Is this nation's next potentially catastrophic foreign intervention worthy of some panic? I'd say yes. But where's the coverage? That's the question. Till the next time, stay kind, stay curious. For Laura Flanders & Friends, I'm Laura, and if you want my [full unedited conversation](#) with today's guests, you can get it through subscribing to our free podcast. All the information's at our website.

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