



Felony Littering Trials Under Way in Asheville

***The Final Straw Radio
Mar 19, 2023***

This week: a chat with Pip, a defendant in, and Grace, a supporter of, the Aston Park Defendants case which led to the arrest of 16 people, including 2 journalists for the Asheville Blade, many facing various charges of felony littering and conspiracy to felony litter. You can read some background to this in the words of the Sanctuary Park defendants at **AVLSolidarity.NoBlogs.Org** by clicking the “Our Story” link and there’s a bunch more there, including how to support the defendants monetarily. We spend the hour talking about gentrification, police repression, mutual aid and resistance in this small, “progressive” mountain town in the US south. Trials begin April 10, 2023.

ASP Substack: <https://sanctuarycampdefendantupdates.substack.com/>

ASP Venmo: [@AVLDefendantFund](#)

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Cover photo by Veronica Coit, Asheville Blade.

TFSR: Would you please introduce yourselves with any names, preferred pronouns or affiliation that you'd like to share? And since we're talking about the cases of mutual aid activists and radical journalists that are currently heading through the courts in Asheville, do you have any affiliation with those cases that you want to share or the support for those groups?

Pip: Yes, sure. My name is Pip and I currently have a felony littering charge associated with all this hubbub. Been around the Asheville area about 18 years. And affiliations: I'm just a country queer.

Grace: My name is Grace, I use they or she pronouns and I've been in Asheville for about 17 years, done some work alongside Asheville Survival Program and then became involved in this absurd case.

TFSR: Cool. So we're here to speak about the Aston Park Defendants cases and the circumstances surrounding them, as they, again, wind their way through the courts. I'd like to go a bit more into detail about the cases, but in the meantime, if you could just give us a quick overview of the incidents and the charges that people are currently facing, that'd be super helpful.

P: Yeah. So, 16 folks received felony littering charges and this is in regards to a demonstration in a public park in Asheville advocating for sanctuary camping for folks who live on the street. And that happened around Christmas time in 2021 and so we've just been in the long slog of court ever since then with those charges. And the charges are pretty rare: felony littering is not a common charge (laughs).

TFSR: Is that sort of a thing that people react to when you tell them that, or when you've interacted with the court system? Like "this is the charge that I'm facing" or whatever?

P: Yes. I've definitely had people, when I've been explaining what's going on, find it pretty unbelievable, like to the point of wondering if I'm making it up, I suppose. But even judges at different court dates that we've had have thrown their hands up in exasperation or been visibly frustrated about how stupid this whole thing is. So I feel like there's got to be some hope of this getting dropped if even the judges think it's stupid, but who knows. We'll see.

TFSR: I think it'd be fair to say that the foundation of what is being struggled over in the courts right now is the question of how houseless neighbors are treated, what resources are made available to them, and how that's done. Can you talk a bit about Asheville generally, something about the city politics and the industries here, how the city is presented generally as a progressive city, and who lives on the streets and in the wild spaces around here?

G: Asheville definitely bills itself as kind of the progressive haven or a little “blue dot” (meaning liberal/Democrat) I often hear it referred to as. Our primary economic driver is tourism and we also have just an exorbitant amount of breweries. We’ve seen an influx of people also, over the past several years from all over the country, especially through COVID, so we have a lot of new folks in the area. We spend a lot of money through the tourism and development authority trying to attract people to come here. And our unhoused neighbors are, you know, being pushed further and further out as housing prices increase. We have the highest cost of living in the state. And so people will be camping often on roadsides, which is usually NCDOT property. There are some other spots where people just are trying to find someplace to go because it’s basically illegal to sleep anywhere in our town. We’re spending a lot of money on sweeping any encampments that-that they find, that the police find.

P: And as far as who’s homeless in Asheville -- that demographic information is a little different depending on who you’re talking to -- some homeless service providers that take care of the local chronically homelessness say up to 90% of folks are local. The annual census data says about 71% of folks are local. But as far as demographics within that, it definitely hit the Black community a lot harder. The Black homeless population is twice as large [per capita] as Asheville’s Black population at large.

And then what we have seen is just such a rapid rise in the rent prices. It’s just pushing out locals. I think, anecdotally in the 15 years that I’ve been here, rent has about tripled, but more concrete data that we’ve gotten recently said that rents raised 41% since just the beginning of the pandemic so I know this isn’t Asheville specific. A lot of places are dealing with this, but it’s just super rapid rise in rent prices.

TFSR: Yeah, I guess there’s an element of that too, around housing stock and availability that probably contributes to the increased cost. Not only that a lot of people are moving here and there’s not keeping a pace with that with construction of new, quote unquote, “affordable housing”, but also houses or rooms that would be considered long term rentals going into things like VRBO and Airbnb for short term turnover at a higher price. Is that another thing that’s contributing to this issue?

G: I think definitely. The city of Asheville in name has a ban on Airbnbs, however, they don’t enforce it at all. So I believe there’s like 5,000 Airbnbs, in Buncombe County. So that has pushed a lot of people out. All the time I find that I have people reaching out to me who their rent’s either gone up significantly overnight, or their landlords are selling their houses out from under them, or converting them to an Airbnb.

P: I know the Asheville Free Press has recently done some analyzing of local GIS data saying that 11% of all housing stock here is owned by people with primary addresses out of state, so that doesn't even take into account people who have multiple addresses here in town that could be Airbnb. I think another big thing that we've seen is just, there's been no new public housing stock in such a long time here. Our current waitlist for single units is two to three years, and that's if you can jump through all the hoops on the way to get one of those units. So yeah, just not enough housing stock for-for folks that live here.

TFSR: I know I've lived in a couple of apartment complexes that used to be public housing, that then transitioned into mixed Section 8 housing. For listeners that aren't familiar, buildings that were built with public money, to be able to provide affordable or free housing for folks on disability, folks who were just without the income to be able to provide housing for themselves otherwise, suddenly, over the number of years getting privatized. "The Woods" for instance I lived in, and I moved there, I think seven years into the 10 year plan that they had, where they were purchased by a private management company. They were capped on how much they could raise rent each year during that period of time but after that 10 year period, that housing was going to be just available to whoever. Being near the university, I'm sure that it went to a bunch of students that were coming in from out of town that maybe had the resources available, and pushed out the mostly working class and largely Black and Brown population of folks that were living there and who had been living there for a number of years. And I imagine that like that's another contributing factor to this sort of thing when we're talking about public housing.

G: Yeah, I know that Hawthorne is one of the property groups that just said they would no longer accept Section 8 vouchers. There's been some push in the community to try to get some kind of income discrimination ordinance because the landlords are still getting paid, and actually really reliably from the government funding sources. So especially given the population that receives those vouchers, too, I mean I think that there's a case to be made that it's housing discrimination, period, to not accept those, but that's another huge issue. Families wait, sometimes years, on the waitlist to receive the vouchers only to not actually be able to use them once they receive them, because there's no place that will accept them.

P: Yeah, if you go on the Asheville Craigslist in "housing" and just type in Section 8, the last number of times I've done that the only time Section 8 comes up is on housing that's listed that says "no Section 8". So it's pretty wild to see how few places will take them.

TFSR: Listeners to the show may be familiar with some of the incidents

and groups that are involved in this discussion around the Aston Park repression. Over the years we've talked to people like Ursula Wren about the how the "policing crisis" in August of 2020 and spoken with people from Asheville Survival Program. We've spoke with folks about the defendants case and about the protests around housing and sweeps when they were going on. But for those who aren't familiar, can y'all give kind of a quick background to ASP and the local police's attitudes to them?

P: Yeah, so Asheville Survival Program started at the beginning of the pandemic. When it first started it was primarily grocery delivery for folks that were immunocompromised and couldn't leave their house. And then the health department shut down the ability for the local homeless day center to serve coffee and food, and so a bunch of sweeties decided to take that on. And they were doing it seven days a week, which is pretty much a miracle to have punks be awake early in the morning seven days a week for a really long time. As services have come back that has gotten pared down to Saturday and Sundays. Throughout those three years Asheville Survival Program also operated a Free Store for quite a while, along with funding direct aid asks.

As far as the tension, I would say, the tensions began rising when the police made associations between Asheville Survival Program and some demonstrations at big camp evictions. And so that's where the tension started. And it grew a lot because Asheville Survival Program -- "ASP" from here on out -- served food in a public park that's really close to a [mocking voice] very fancy set of tennis courts that is some fancy clay floor that people come from far away to play tennis on. And so I think the city wide tension started rising very quickly, because a lot of those tennis players have a fair bit of pull with the city. So the fight of "whose space is this public park?" kept getting amplified and amplified, because of that tension between the tennis court people not wanting to see poor people on the weekends when they're trying to play tennis when ASP had food and gear and stuff at the park.

TFSR: Years ago, we were talking to Steady Collective and when they were using space rented by Firestorm Books. They had continued to have their van out front and provide services on Tuesdays. But there had been a big backlash ostensibly from business owners, maybe from just like concerned an NIMBY* neighbors. I'm kind of not clear on-on who all makes up this diffuse cloud of fart smell that have been messing with projects like Steady distributing needles, but I feel like there's a there's an overlap between the groups or interests or whatever business associations get formed -- that have

*Acronym for the phrase "not in my backyard", which is used to describe people who oppose certain developments happening in their neighborhood. They usually care more about small businesses and city aesthetics than actual human beings, and oppose things like local harm reduction projects, or efforts to advocate for and increase the quality of life of homeless people.

been messing with Steady and trying to press the city in the state to outlaw certain forms of distribution -- and some of the pressure that ASP and adjacent activists have been facing. Is that fair to say? And are there any groups that stand out to you?

G: I mean, I know that there is a group called Asheville Business Owners -- which is incredibly vague, we don't know exactly who all is a part of that group -- that had put up a large billboard on Patton Avenue saying "we love the cops!" or something like that. There's certainly a group now that regularly attends city council meetings, I think they're calling themselves the Asheville Coalition for Public Safety [ACPS], I call them the Citizens Council [sarcastic reference to reactionary white, segregationist organizations in the US South since Reconstruction]. They are connected, obviously, in this class of people and they're pretty well organized, I'll give them that. They've really used a lot of high pressure tactics, and fear mongering, in order to go after these kinds of things, like community care where we're helping our neighbors.

Also in January of 2022, so right after this incident happened, there was a police officer Mike Lamb, who said openly at a city council meeting that they don't arrest homeless folks, they arrest, quote, "activists and anarchists". So there's certainly an element about who is allowed to have a say, and what forms of political speech are permitted.

P: And I would also add to that a big part of a lot of these pretty organized anti-homeless groups has been to propagate this myth -- which once again, I know this is not an Asheville specific thing -- that homeless people here are coming from other places, that they're getting bussed in. Or that it's a "if you build it, they will come" thing, that the reason there's homeless people here is because there's homeless services here. That's just patently untrue, but they've been really successful at putting that myth out there, and in inflating the public safety data.

Specifically, there's a recent article that came out showing that the crime downtown has gone down, but there's still all these really nasty articles coming out about how unsafe it is and how unsanitary it is, because all these "people are coming from elsewhere". It just seems like a really easy tactic to crack down on stuff when you're "othering" people, like "this is not our people, these are people coming from elsewhere, and pooping somewhere because there's no public bathroom" or whatever.

G: Yeah. At that previous city council meeting in January 22 there was a presentation with these horrific graphics where it had a tent in the middle of two concentric circles, where whoever the data analyst is for Asheville police was trying to claim that the vast majority of so called "crime" in downtown Asheville was from our unhoused population. And the way that they did that is that they took a spreadsheet where, for example, one that I specifically remember is that somebody had called in

the Montford neighborhood and said that someone is sleeping in a car. They took that location point, they do a 500 foot radius around it, then they do 1000 foot radius around it, and they took all the crime data from an entire year, and that was their methodology. Which, from my basic memory of high school statistics class, I knew that that was nonsense.

I had a data analyst had looked it over and disproved it all, but it didn't matter, because the narrative was already out there, it already made its way through the media. There's no accountability in terms of getting them to correct that data. And I think we know, likely on March 28, at the next public safety meeting, they're going to do another data dump, where they try to attribute crime to homeless people. I'm assuming we're going to have no background information on where, where they even got their numbers.

So that's something that's really important to me personally, to keep an eye on, because they're definitely using it to fuel their narrative. And I don't think that they have people who know how to math at Asheville Police Department [laughs]. And, you know, they start with what they want to present, and then they make up the data to "support it".

P: Can I address something real quick that's out of context of this question? I just know that sometimes, when I speak on rad [media] outlets, sometimes people have issues with the use of the word "homeless". I just wanted to put in a little thing there of like, well, I totally understand that some people identify as "houseless", or different sets of words there, but I've been corrected a lot more times [by homeless people] to say "homeless". Sometimes I just worry that rad communities make up PC terms that might not be coming from the populations that they're talking about. So that's why I personally use that word. But I know that in the past, I've gotten some shit from, like, rad outlets for using that word. So just saying why.

TF SR: Back in 2012, we did a conversation with folks that were resisting a Business Improvement District that was being planned for downtown and that was when Firestorm was still down there, and as a local business was helping to push against that, alongside a bunch of other folks, whether it'd be like folks from the homeless/houseless community, what have you, or other concerned community members. I've heard Inklings that there's a push for a similar thing now -- I don't really have the details or know if that's a downtown thing, or West Asheville thing, or what -- is that worth bringing up in this context? Or should I move on to the next question?

P: I don't know. I feel like it's not something that ever went away. They bring it up from time to time -- it's something a lot of council members through time have thought was lovely -- and I feel like there is a lot of grisly momentum right now of specifically downtown anti-homeless sentiments, and those words have come up again, but I wouldn't say it's unique right now, because they just bring it up a cou-

ple of times a year. Grace, have you experienced that?

G: So right now, I'm seeing specifically Sage Turner pushing for this. But I think what some of the pushback that they're receiving on it is, in my understanding, that would mean actually higher taxes for downtown businesses. So of course they want to protect their capital, which is what all of this is always about. I'll be curious to see how that plays out from the folks who have been pushing for more policing, if that's something that they actually want if it means that they would have to actually take money out of their own pockets.

TFSR: Well, now that we've gotten some of the context out of the way for the case, I wonder if you all could talk a bit about how the cases are going, how many folks are still facing charges, if some folks have settled? And yeah, kind of what's going to trial?

P: Yeah, for sure. So it's been a long span of a lot of uneventful things for most of it. There have been three individuals that have taken plea deals. And mostly that was for folks that were looking at more severe consequences. And so the rest of the folks are either going to trial on April 10, if the state decides to go through with it, or they're just off the calendar, so charges are not dropped, they're just...in the matrix, I guess? But four or five folks are going to be taken to trial on April 10 as it stands now.

G: And they're just holding the other cases open, correct? So that's something to kind of hold over people's heads. It's not going to be a resolution for them either.

P: Yeah. It feels like -- this is just my speculation -- that what they're doing is if they can win this trial, then they're probably keep pursuing it, and if they can't, then it will probably be resolved.

TFSR: Or if they win this trial, then they may feel they have the leverage to force the other people into accepting whatever plea's, if that's even a possibility anymore, I guess. Because the state has been offering plea's and people have just said, mostly, "this is unreasonable, I'm not gunna do that, I'd rather fight this". Which I really respect because on top of having something floating around for a little over a year, it'll be almost a year and a half since the arrests-

P: If I can say something real quick, though. I think a lot of the plea deals have seemed completely unappetizing to most people because, for a lot of folks, they're just wasn't illegal things done. So I think for a lot of folks, it's like "I just don't want to face any consequences because I literally have a felony charge for bringing seven pizzas to a park", which is just not illegal. So the state could offer like, "oh, you can

take this misdemeanor with all this community service” but I think a lot of folks don’t want to do that if you’re bringing hot cocoa to the park, you know.

G: Yeah, I was at one of the one of the plea’s and to hear them read aloud the allegations of what was brought to the park, which was like clothing to be distributed, some sheets, I think toilet paper [laughs] To hear them say it out loud in court, I just kept waiting for the judge to go “wait, stop, what do you mean?!” But of course, that didn’t happen.

P: Yeah, listening to the state throughout this process has been really funny. Like the Assistant DA will say things like “these people were advocating for there to be places for homeless people to camp!” [laughs] and they’ll say it like it’s this ridiculous, crazy thing.

But I think at the core of this, it just brings to light what we call “trash” here. So I think of an example of if I left my wallet somewhere and someone threw it away, it doesn’t mean that my wallet is trash, it just means that someone threw it away. So, like just looking at this whole situation, it just seems like the state is framing things as trash, which just clearly is people’s survival items.

TFSR: As far as media coverage has gone, it seems like until the last couple of months has been pretty scant. Once the ACLU -- the American Civil Liberties Union, which is a legal organization -- the chapter for North Carolina, began making statements concerning park bans for defendants and requesting release of body cam footage from the arrest, and making statements about the arrest of journalists while doing their jobs. And also defendant Sarah Norris has been willing to speak about their experiences to numerous outlets at the local and national level, which I think is awesome. How do you feel the media coverage has been? What’s shifted? And what have you seen the impact towards the prosecution of the case?

P: Yeah, I’ve been really surprised at how well some of the local outlets have presented this case. Because in general our local TV station usually will just present whatever APD posts on their Facebook, [sarcastically] it’s very high quality journalism. But throughout this process, media outlets that usually would not be helpful in a case like this have been pretty helpful.

It was pretty wild when the ACLU asked for the body cam footage to be released to them, the city just decided to put it all on the internet as kind of like, “Well, fuck you, we’re gonna put this on the internet”. All of the media coverage from it was like, “Wow, look how ridiculous the police are being in this footage”. It was really lovely to have something that was meant to harm us like just be taken and looked at, and the resolution was “this is ridiculous”. That felt really good, especially when it was done by conservative media outlets that we wouldn’t normally trust to have good coverage of such a thing.

G: Yeah, I've been really impressed with Asheville Citizen Times as well and have been really appreciative of their coverage of this. They've definitely stayed on top of it throughout the process and even show up at court dates and stuff like that. So, you know, I think local journalism is really important to be able to have somebody who has eyes on this.

I think the ACLU involvement helped significantly. I don't think we explained actually, how the ACLU is involved. Those people who are arrested on felony littering charges were banned from all city parks for three years. At that point, there's no place they could really even protest at all. Legally, publicly. Obviously these cases are still open, so they did that with no information on why they were doing it, or even what the allegations were. And then, on Christmas night, there were two journalists who were arrested. The body cam footage really clearly shows that police say, "Hey, look, they're filming. Let's arrest them first". And they call them journalists. They know they're journalists. And one of the tactics they're using, and that is to just try to say, "Well they're not journalists", but the police call the journalist.

TFSR: I guess the one clear exception to the local coverage has been the really sharp turnaround of Asheville Watchdog, maybe that's why the Citizen Times has gotten better, is it because they got rid of John Boyle?

G: Ugh, yeah [sounds disgusted]. My flags were raised when Asheville Watchdog hired John Boyle. We reached out to Watchdog from the beginning, because they were started by some retired Pulitzer Prize winning journalists who moved to Asheville. And I was like, "Cool, we really need some investigative journalism on this". And now they have just taken this hard turn and are posting these really gross articles just trying to villainize this population, and they're really loving Mike Lamb who is the officer who has been hell bent on pursuing these.

I mean, I even see this guy going downtown harassing people. I'm like, how much time do you have on your hands to just, like, he's pretty high up in the department to be personally harassing people who are sleeping on the streets. So that's definitely been very disappointing. And I think that kind of speaks to the neoliberal agenda [laughs].

TFSR: So for me, a really important element of how this case moves forward has been the collective voice of the defendants working to keep focus, not just on the injustice of the cases, but continuing to center the context of narratives around homelessness, poverty, access, policy and community. Because as these cases continue, the city, police and national media are still pushing that narrative that was just mentioned about like [sarcastically] a "woke" Asheville that's a cesspool of sin where violent, drug addled crime is endemic, and the embattled police don't have the resources that they need. I wonder if you could both talk a little bit about this narrative, who you see

pushing it and what you see as the goals? And is it getting a bite? Or is it just the most rabid conservatives that are actually believing it?

P: Well, I don't know. It's-it's-it's weird, because sometimes it feels like both? Like there's been moments over the past couple years where I know that some of the complaints -- that I personally don't believe data backs up -- has made it to national news. Our police being understaffed made it to the cover of The New York Times recently. That nasty Watchdog article made it to Fox News nationally, this idea that Asheville is super violent. Personally I've never felt unsafe here and the data doesn't seem to back up these wild things. So like, there'll be moments where these strange local complaints will get farflung attention, but I don't know who's running that [laughs], like, who's making that happen when it does happen. So it's hard to say because at times it feels like it's a lot of people and other times it feels like it's no one.

G: I have a suspect, which could potentially be Cole Pro Media, which is the PR firm that Asheville police hired for, I think, \$225,000 of taxpayer expense. They originally brought them in after we made national news during the Uprisings in 2020 when police violently destroyed a medic station, and they were stabbing water bottles. It was really something to see. So they hired this cleanup firm that, actually an ex TV journalist, Laura Cole, who owns the company. I haven't been able to show the link to that and this citizens group. But, for example, one of the people who's involved in Asheville Citizens for Public Safety is the wife of the chief of police. They're obviously getting information fed to them directly from police. I don't think any of them [ACPS] are getting paid, I can't believe they haven't asked for their piece of the pie because they have a whole firm that's devoted to this.

They have another firm that's devoted to trying to recruit, Epic Recruiting, that's trying to recruit police officers in Asheville. By the police's own admission, it will take them 10 years to return to normal staffing levels. To which I say, "Yay!!"

It's funny because they're like "more money, more money", but like, there's no one to hire. Nobody wants to be police. That's great news. I'm happy to hear it. And so, you know, I'm not sure what their intention is to do with the end of this process. Because at the end of the day, you don't have the staff, you don't have the staff. They've refused to move any of the police budget, or, we don't even actually know the numbers, like how much extra money do the police have because of the staffing shortage that we could be funneling into any kind of other community services that could help. Such as overdose response or helping homeless people, yet we just keep putting more and more money towards that. They also just voted to spend \$500,000 from our COVID-19, American Rescue Plan Act Funds to clear encampments. So, you know, I think that it's a small group of vocal people who are directly tied to the police.

P: It's such a wild dichotomy also, to see them so loudly complaining about being

understaffed, while completely refusing to cede any responsibility to other kinds of responses. And strange animosities being brought up when anybody offers to do some of that work.

A couple years ago I worked at a homeless drop in center, and over the two years that I was there, I think there was only twice-a-year staff initiated calls to 911 -- I mean, for non ambulance issues -- and that made the APD really mad at us that we weren't calling them. We had to go in for this meeting, because they were all angry, and I remember the police chief saying like, "You can't just not call us when you don't need us!" It was like... "wait...isn't that what you train the public to do? Don't call it when you don't need them?" The idea that people were using deescalation, and not the police, made them very mad, and on my part was the beginning of this animosity. Like it became a little personal, this animosity between me and APD was this idea that we would dare to use deescalation instead of 911. It made them very upset.

TFSR: As Grace pointed to, it takes a while for the cops to train themselves and get experience and get out into the field -- but there's an element of attrition, right? Where people are actually quitting the force. Like, for instance -- I don't know if it was that same New York Times story -- there was the New York Times story about the one officer who had quit the APD, and when she had been hired she was touted by the department as a diversity hire, because she was a lesbian. And then she quit, and then later went on to the New York Times again, got interviewed about how she got rehired, because even though she had taken this ethical stance before they offered her more money, so she decided to come back. Not to say that there's a good way to run a police force, but it seems like they're doing something wrong if they're losing hires to other cities. Or is it just "the woke Asheville culture" is poisoning new recruits and turning them into antifa super soldiers that are fighting hippies?

P: Well, that's the funny thing about that article, because that officer said that the reason they quit was because people kept chanting at them "All gay cops are traitors"-

G: [bursts into laughter]

P: [cracking up] Funny.

TFSR: It's true.

P: Yeah, it's just like all those woke gays. I don't know.

G: There does seem to be this sentiment that you'll hear from these people, like "If

we could just love the police enough, if we would just tell them how much we love them enough, then they would come back". They're like, "No, you city council members won't say you love the police" like that was a big attack on them that we saw coming out. But I personally, if any former APD officers are listening to this... I imagine there have to be people who said "No, I'm not gonna gas my community".

We live in a small town, relatively speaking, we're in community with each other. You run into people and I mean, I just think that even on the body cam footage, there is an officer who says, "Why are we here? Why are we doing this?" I'm like, if this officer, I don't know who that is, but you don't have to do this job. There are plenty of ways where if you really got into policing because you care about your community, you want to support them, there are ways you can actually do that.

P: On the body cam footage there's another really beautiful moment where the police and other people were just far apart and were yelling and one person yelled "You're getting paid shit to do terrible shit". And you could just hear the chatter between them like, "Well, she's got a point" [words become illegible here from laughing hysterically].

G: Right! You could go work at Target and make as much money, like why would you choose this? It doesn't make sense.

TFSR: Well, then another another thing that came out on the footage, if I'm correct -- and there are shortened videos, people have done the terrible work of watching hours and hours and hours, it's like 12 hours or however much it was of the police bantering and sort of doofily walking into stuff -- Don't they get a call about some sort of robbery going on across town, and then decide to -- maybe I'm misremembering this -- and then deciding, rather than go on the call, they call more units down to the park to deal with the circumstances on the ground?

G: So I didn't see that part of the footage. I admittedly chopped footage together -- it got very confusing because it's all the different angles at once -- but I do believe that that was in a part of it. And we also learned in court that they had every single officer from Asheville police at the park that night with the exception of two. When there's all these claims that they need a large budget, is this how we're going to direct our resources? Even by their own logic, it doesn't make sense.

P: Yeah. And I don't know if this is coming up later in questions, but I also would say in looking back at their investigation of these littering charges, there was a phenomenal amount of resources used in some of it. Like they had put a tracker on ASP's van, they had put a camera across the street from the Free Store. They had been watching ASP's food distro just from the tennis court building. And so just

looking at all these hundreds and hundreds of hours of work about...picnics. To surveil picnics. It was really wild to see that and then hear them be like [mockingly], “We’re so short staffed!”

TFSR: Do you all have the numbers of how much they claimed it cost to cart away the garbage that led to the felony charges? And do we have any assumptions about how much they’ve spent on this case so far?

P: So their claim is that it took them \$1,600 or something-

TFSR: I think \$2,600-

P: ...to tote it away. And it was funny, Asheville Police Facebook put that number out -- and I don’t think you could find a more biased crowd than the people who follow APD on Facebook -- but even within those comments, they’re like, “Whoa, that doesn’t really look like trash.” and “Wait, you had to use machinery? You really underpay your workers.” And it was really funny, like, from how many different angles I got attacked about it.

I stopped doing math because it was getting just so absurd of how much money they put into it. But I will say, I did do the math about how much money it took them to do the park ban appeals, when they banned everyone from parks and then had these appeal meetings and they had a lot of very well paid people at those meetings. In doing the math about how much money they put into just that part of the process -- which is very small compared to like all the court costs and all of this -- it would have paid for dumpsters and toilet services at two camps for a full year. So looking at data comparisons like that, it’s just like “this is a choice and they could choose to do something different with those resources that actually would address trash.” If they’re so worried about trash there’s ways to facilitate trash clean-up, which is providing services to camps.

G: Yeah [sarcastically] it’s like a trash can. What a novel concept. It’s ridiculous to just hear it over and over again. You’re like “Okay, well, a bathroom and trash service would get us a really long way into addressing what they’re supposed concerns are.”

P: It just makes it very clear that this entire thing is not about trash.

G: Yeah, and that they’re talking about humans as trash. I mean, that’s one of the most disturbing parts about it.

TFSR: Back on the subject of the amount of resources that the city, the police and the prosecutors are putting into the case, District Attorney Todd Williams has been getting a lot of heat for a backlog of murder cases that

they haven't attempted to prosecute. I think that I have seen people address this issue in some pretty thoughtful manners; I would love to hear if you could talk a little bit about what that is, the 40 cases or so. Also the dangers of talking about it wrong, what people could miss pretty easily. I could see some news source just being like [mockingly], "Oh we've got a lot of murders going on. We need more police".

P: The reason that stands out as gross to me is that the state is prioritizing this so heavily -- this being advocating for sanctuary camping, and then punishing that -- they're advocating for that so harshly that they're willing to keep people who are waiting for their day in court about some of those long term charges- like they've been in county jail, not prison, for years. And they're just having them sit there and sit there while they hash out what is trash and what is not trash and kids in the park. It is just a complete disregard for those people that are just sitting and waiting in Buncombe County Detention Center.

G: ...Which is the deadliest jail in the state of North Carolina. Eight people died in less than a two year period in that jail. When I think about it, that's what I think about, I think about the risk to holding up the legal system when there are literally people's lives on the line who are in there right now.

P: Especially, a lot of those people were in Buncombe County [Detention Center] through COVID, which Buncombe County jail already suck so badly. And how bad it sucked during COVID was just awful. Like not being able to leave your cell at all and two meals a day. So these people that have been here for years waiting, and the city is like, "We got to talk about this park, and the pizzas that are there. This is very important".

G: It's been really interesting to watch this district attorney as well. He sort of ran as a reformer, and he almost lost his reelection campaign by like 100 votes. The Asheville police, there was a leaked memo that went out, that Asheville police put out to attack Todd Williams, and tried to claim that basically he wasn't being tough enough on so-called "nuisance crimes", stuff like urinating in public and stuff of that nature. But now he's really pushing back and trying to blame the judges and the magistrates. To me that's interesting to watch because it's my belief that the people who are out to get Todd, that he's not going to be able to make them happy no matter what he does, and yet he is working overtime to try to please them.

TFSR: He's like an evil marshmallow. I hate that guy.

G: I hear he just wanders around the park. You can find him just wandering around the parking deck by the courthouses in circles really weirdly.

TFSR: Looking for dookie or whatever?

G: He's also really hard to get in touch with. His office didn't even have a voicemail box setup for a while. So yeah, he's incredibly inaccessible.

TFSR: He kind of ran his first campaign on, among other things, not prosecuting people for weed [laughs]. And this is what he's doing into his second term. Good job, dude. He's also had some attrition that he's had to deal with, as I understand a bunch of ADA's have left.

G: Yeah, I mean, I think there's definitely a staffing crisis which makes it all the more ridiculous that they also have limited resources and are using their time with this. I actually tried reaching out to their office yesterday and they directed me to the ADA who is on this case, but we know that Todd is also directly and heavily involved and I'm sure that there is great pressure from Asheville police.

TFSR: So because I mentioned Sarah Norris before -- who's one of the defendants -- their willingness to talk to the media about their personal experiences and the impacts of this case has been, and I think, really moving for a lot of people. Being a parent who can't take their kids to the park -- and as has been pointed out -- for the ridiculous charges that they're facing for supposedly going out right before Code Blue blizzard to try to stop the city from evicting yet another [encampment]. The city at one point said that people could camp there, because they had been moved off of Cherry Street or something like that.

The fact that Sarah has been willing to go out there and speak about that, I think is, again, really powerful. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the disruption that the case has caused in people's lives, the wasted energy and the resources that could have been directed towards helping people survive or get off the streets -- if that's what they want -- and what you'd like to see come out of these trials?

P: Yeah, I don't know. I feel like it's been different for different people, like some people have lost their housing or jobs, tangible things. I think a big loss was that ASP had to move out of the public parks because we weren't able to have enough people show up every week cause so many folks were banned from public parks that do the food distro every week. And I think it's just a loss to lose the only public forum in town as a place to gather and have meetings, especially during COVID when it's nice to have outdoor meetings. What was the second part of that question?

TFSR: It was kind of long. What you'd like to see come out of the trials, obviously besides charges dropped. I mean, as you say, there's-there's the

personal elements, there's a tangible elements -- losing jobs, losing housing, there's the stresses -- but there's also the cultural and social impact of losing people engaging with these issues in public spaces.

P: Yeah. I do hope that the ACL addressing the park ban policy will help make a meaningful long term change on how people being banned from public spaces is in the future. I also think, if that goes well, if the criminal charges get dropped, that civil case goes well, that there might be a lot more hesitancy to arrest people in public spaces, kick them out of public spaces. I think it'd be great to invest in youth using public space and other things that public space is for.

G: This is a big dream -- and I'm not sure that this is on the table --but I would love if the city of Asheville had to pay for what they have done in dollars, and that that money could go back into mutual aid. That would be my biggest, most beautiful dream. And, you know, I like to envision just a huge park party, when everyone can go back and we have this beautiful moment together. Because that week was really one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen or been a part of in my life, to see the community that was being built at the park.

Actually, I brought my mom with me on Christmas morning. She still talks about that like, "this is the best Christmas we've ever had. This is exactly what we want to be doing and being a part of caring for each other." Because I think that that's just part of who we are. And I see my neighbors doing that all the time. As much as they're these vocal people, one thing that I actually really love about Asheville is that there is this sense of community and taking care of one another. We will not let them take that away from us, no matter what happens with these charges.

TFSR: I guess the final question that I have is: legal fees aren't cheap, do you all have fundraising around the case that you would care to boost? And what about spreading the word about the case? Can you point listeners to where they can find more or offer other ways of support?

P: Yes. So we do have some funds and are collecting money for the upcoming trial date just for folks who have to take those weeks off of work. And our Venmo is @ **AVLDefendedFund** and then our website to follow stuff is-

G: avlsolidarity.noblogs.org

P: Thank you, Grace.

G: Oh, you're good.

TFSR: Teamwork.

G: There's also a two part episode on It Could Happen Here, one interview with Sarah Norris and another with somebody from the ACLU who really goes into detail about that, that I would point people to listen to. Just in general you can reach out at avlsolidarity.noblogs.org if you have other connections for other news orgs that might want to provide coverage for this. I think that this is a pattern of the criminalization of protests, we're seeing that a lot with what's happening in Atlanta right now. That's been really heavy on my mind as I've been watching the Cop City project and the domestic terrorism charges that people who are also just sitting in a park have received.

TFSR: And there's also a substack now, right?

G: Lemme find that.

P: While you're finding it, I'll just say if you do have resources another spot to throw them would be Asheville Survival Program to keep them in coffee and things like that. And they are [@avlsurvival](https://www.instagram.com/avlsurvival) [on Venmo] and that's the handle on Instagram also that the defendants usually put out statements.

G: So if you want to follow it on substack, it's [sanctuarycampdefendantupdates.substack.com](https://www.substack.com/p/sanctuarycampdefendantupdates).

TFSR: Cool. Thank you. Is there anything that I didn't ask about that you're inspired to address right now. Take your time and think about it if you want to.

P: I can't think of much.

G: I just have been really inspired to watch all the folks who have been going through this and how they've pursued it. It's so important for them to be able to stand up to this, and for us to be able to talk about what's going on in our community. Even though we can talk about how the number of resources that they're spending on this, you know, that's ridiculous, it just shows how powerful mutual aid really is, or else they wouldn't be spending these kinds of resources to tear it down. If people are listening to this and other places, connecting in with where your mutual aid programs are happening that would be really great, too, so we can grow that.

TFSR: Do you all have any places that you want people in the listening audience to follow you and your work personally?

G: Yeah, I guess. I'm at [thegracebeyond](https://www.tiktok.com/@thegracebeyond) on Tik Tok. I try to post videos where I keep up with some of the things that are happening locally, politically, and sometimes we'll do updates about stuff like this as well.

TFSR: Thank you both, very much, for taking time to have this conversation and for the work that you're doing. I'm glad to be in community with you.

P: Yeah, you too, buddy.

G: Appreciate you.

TFSR: Thanks.

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