

To whom it may concern,

I came to Portland starting a new chapter in my life. I had just finished my graduate degree, and was finally coming back home to the west coast to continue my education. At the time, Portland seemed like such an amazing city, full of life and opportunity to me. I remember being so stricken with how tolerant and kind the people of the city were, and by the diversity of people I found and interacted with. People seemed engaged with the city, and passionate about it, and this beautiful city seemed to send that energy right back.

I live only a handful of blocks away from the Justice Center, so when the protests began, I was front and center to see what was happening. Suddenly, the streets where I used to walk to clear my mind in the afternoons were full of the cracks of pepper balls, the sounds of flashbangs exploding, and sickly yellow clouds of tear gas. I remember weeks of hearing helicopters, explosions, and announcements out of my window. It sounded like a war zone. When my cat knocks things off tables in my apartment now, the bangs as they hit the floor make me jump in cold sweat.

And in response to what? Time and time again, excessive force was used not as deterrent for immediately dangerous activity, but as punishment, for refusal to act in a way that placated the police. Many times, this was not even the result of direct disobeyal of police orders, as unlawful as they often were. Throw a rock at a police officer? Get shot with pepper balls, or rubber bullets. Throw a plastic water bottle? Get shot. Stand in the wrong place? Get shot. Set up a medical tent to help other victims, and don't move quickly enough to gather your supplies when the area is swept? Get shot. Shake the fence? Get shot.

Prevailing in all these uses of excessive force was a staggering level of collateral damage. I distinctly remember standing in Chapman Square one night when police opened fire unannounced, with no warning, on the crowd. "Ow, shit!" the man next to me cried, "they shot me!" We were over a hundred feet back from the fenceline, away from the crowd, simply standing there and observing. Of course, the indiscriminate use of tear gas had similar effects. A group of thousands would be assaulted with chemical weapons, often to punish acts of a single person.

The excessive use of force by police in Portland has taken a city that was in many ways a beacon of hope and opportunity to me, and shown me what truly lies beneath the surface. I call for immediate action on these bills, such that an end is put to this immediately. I should never have to put on a helmet and a gas mask to feel safe in my own streets, from the ones who are supposed to be protecting them. We may only have our safety and security by reclaiming it from the police.

I appreciate your time in reading this testimony.

- John Russo