

# Who's Afraid Of Antonio Pagan?

By Emma Rose and Nate Rosenfield

In the 1980s and 90s, controversial City Councilperson Antonio Pagan was loved and hated by the Lower East Side. And while his political career was short-lived, his complicated legacy lives on.

35 years later, we want to know: was Antonio Pagan to blame for one of the worst police riots in New York City's history?

## TRANSCRIPT

**ROSE:** *This episode contains content that may be upsetting to some listeners.*

**ROSENFIELD:** It's a cold gray morning on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. And the birds are chirping in Tompkins Square Park.

[Birds chirping and footsteps]

**ROSENFIELD:** Old men sit on benches. You can hear howling from the dog run all the way across the park.

[Distant sound of dogs barking]

**ROSENFELD:** It's a quiet, peaceful morning.

**ROSENFELD:** Hey nice to meet you.

**DERIENZO:** Hey how you doing?

**ROSE:** We've come to meet Paul DeRienzo. Paul was here 35 years ago, on the night of August 6, 1988. A night that was *anything* but peaceful.

**DERIENZO:** I was on that corner over there and people were milling about on the sidewalk.

**ROSE:** Paul had just started working for a local radio station.

**DERIENZO:** And I had just bought a tape recorder. A D5 cassette recorder. Made of iron. It was like steel. My first night out with the tape recorder was that night. First night I had been out with it.

**ROSENFELD:** Were you planning to cover the—

**DERIENZO:** I didn't know what was going to happen. I didn't think anything was going to happen. I couldn't have imagined they were going to throw out like thousands of people from the park.

**ROSENFELD:** What happened that night was one of the most violent police riots in New York City's history. The police had been called to enforce a new curfew in Tompkins Square Park. Protesters came out to resist that curfew. And things escalated. Quickly.

[From Paul DeRienzo's documentary: the sound of sirens and people yelling]

**DERIENZO:** There's a bunch of us on the sidewalk. And then I see these cops lining up. And then all of a sudden they just charge without warning. They just charge.

[From Paul's documentary: sound of crowd. DERIENZO: The police are coming across the street. They're coming across the street. They have their clubs out. They're attacking the crowd [screams] they're attacking the crowd.]

**DERIENZO:** And I'm yelling, I have my press pass. I'm press! I'm press!

[From DeRienzo's documentary: DERIENZO: Press pass. Press Pass]

**DERIENZO:** They just totally ignore my press pass and the cop runs right into me. And we go boom. Like over and over, up against the wall. I jump up, and then I just escaped into the crowd.

[From DeRienzo's documentary: sound of helicopter. DERIENZO: They're bandaging this woman's head. Her head is bleeding profusely. And they have a large amount of gauze wrapping around her head... Were you a witness? Did you see what happened here? WOMAN: They fucking beat the three of us up for no reason as well as millions of other people who were just trying to get out of the

way. And we said stop hitting us and they beat on us more. Her head is fucking falling apart. His head is bleeding.]

**ROSE:** When word got out about how the police had acted that night, the city was outraged. An investigation was launched. More than a hundred complaints of police brutality were filed. Six cops were indicted. And the commanding officer, Captain Gerald McNamara, he ended up losing his job.

**ROSENFELD:** Paul, who described himself as an activist as much as a reporter, said that he approached McNamara before the riot and told him, he'd better leave the protesters alone, or things would get out of hand.

**DERIENZO:** I was friendly with McNamara. I couldn't believe it. I said, You should have listened to me man. There wouldn't have been a riot that ruined your life. Was it worth it? You got your life ruined in a riot so you could clear the park for some asshole who doesn't give a shit about you. In the community board. So...

**ROSENFELD:** Who is that asshole?

**DERIENZO:** Antonio Pagan.

**ROSENFELD:** Antonio Pagan.

A local politician from the Lower East Side. And someone who Paul despised. In *his* telling, the riot was Pagan's fault, and the police were following *his* orders.

**ROSE:** So who was Antonio Pagan? And was he really responsible for the riot that broke out in Tompkins Square Park?

I'm Emma Rose.

**ROSENFELD:** And I'm Nate Rosenfield.

**ROSENFELD:** This is Shoe Leather. A podcast that digs up stories from New York's past to see how yesterday's news affects us today.

This season we go back to the summer of 1988. To the riot in Tompkins Square Park.

**ROSE:** In this episode, we look at the complicated legacy of Antonio Pagan.

Pagan was an activist who fought to improve local homeless shelters.

But he was later accused of waging war on the unhoused.

An advocate for housing justice was who was railed for

being in the pocket of real estate developers.

Pagan was loved and hated.

And he may be the key to understanding how a riot broke out in Tompkins Square Park.

This is Shoe Leather, season four, “It’s Our Fucking Park.”

You’re listening to, “Who’s Afraid of Antonio Pagan?”

## **PAGAN AND THE NEIGHBORHOOD**

**ROSENFELD:** Antonio Pagan passed away in 2009. So, the story we’re about to tell you about who he was and his role in the Tompkins Square Park riot is going to lack one crucial perspective — his.

We’ve talked to his friends. His enemies. And the people who worked closely alongside him in every stage of his political career.

**ROSE:** Here’s what we’ve been able to piece together.

Pagan was born on the Lower East Side in 1958. His parents were Puerto Rican. His dad wasn’t around much, but he was close with his mother and three brothers. When he was a teenager, Pagan moved to Puerto Rico and eventually got a law degree there. He moved back to New York City in the 1980’s to take a teaching job at a local college.

**ROSENFELD:** When he moved back to the city, he came home to the Lowest East Side.

**RODRIGUEZ:** The East Village, The Lower East Side was not the chic, cool, hipster neighborhood it is today.

**ROSENFELD:** That's George Rodriguez. He was a friend of Pagan's and also grew up on the Lower East Side.

**RODRIGUEZ:** It was always a community of Latinos, Polish, Ukrainians, Jews, Afro Americans, and, you know, young starving artists that would come here, trying to make it big in New York.

**ROSENFELD:** George loved the neighborhood. But he saw firsthand how bad things were starting to get in the 80s. Crime was skyrocketing across the city, and the Lower East Side was particularly bad.

**RODRIGUEZ:** You know, there were swaths of entire blocks that were just abandoned, you know, empty lots of abandoned buildings. Crime was a bit pervasive.

**JUNE CROSS:** It's 5:00 p.m. Evening rush hour at the heart of New York's Lower East Side. Prime time for drug dealers. They're most likely selling heroin, or cocaine. To some observers the openness of their trade may seem shocking.

**ROSE:** Antonio Pagan lived on Third Street. He was four blocks from the park. And his apartment window looked out at the homeless shelter directly across the street.

People were often crowded around the shelter's steel doors. There were reports of drug dealings. Muggings. Assaults. Some people who lived in the neighborhood didn't feel safe. Including Pagan.

But he wasn't the type to just sit around and wait for someone else to fix the neighborhood's problems.

Pagan decided to join his block association. It's basically a group of neighbors who advocate local issues to the city. Not long after joining the Third Street Block Association, Pagan became the president. That's how he met Howard Hemsley, who lived a few blocks away on First Street.

**HEMSLEY:** Hi, this is Howard Hemsley.

**ROSENFELD:** Hi, Howard. This is Nate calling. How are you doing?

**ROSENFELD:** Howard explained to us that he has a condition called strangulated vocal cords, which makes his voice sound strained. Howard was the president of his own block association. And they had a problem: the city was considering building a new shelter on his street. He was trying to find a way to stop it. He knew how bad things had gotten at the Third Street shelter, and he didn't want the same thing to happen on his block.

So Howard set up a meeting with Pagan. But it didn't go according to plan. When he asked Pagan for his help, he just laughed.

**HEMSLEY:** [Laughs] "You want us to help you? We have been living in hell and nobody gives a damn."

**ROSENFELD:** "You want us to help you?" Pagan told him. "We have been living in hell and no one gives a damn."



But Howard didn't give up that easily. He made a deal with Pagan. The two would work together: to fight the new shelter. And then to push for improvements to the old one.

**ROSE:** Pagan and Howard started BASTA.

It stands for: before another shelter tears us apart. It's also Spanish for "enough."

Pagan knew that the homelessness in the area was the result of a housing crisis on the Lower East Side. Many buildings were falling apart. Some people lived without electricity or running water. Tenants in the housing projects were jammed into overcrowded apartments. Other buildings were becoming more expensive as real estate developers started buying up property.

Pagan became executive director of a local non-profit. They built affordable housing in the neighborhood. Their goal was to place people who were living in the shelter system in low-cost apartments. That's where he first started working with George Rodriguez.

**RODRIGUEZ:** That's when I noticed how fiery and passionate he was about things he cared about. He really did care about the families that were moving in. He cared about, you know, the housing stock, making sure everything was done, managed correctly.

**ROSENFELD:** But Pagan didn't just want to improve housing. He wanted to improve the entire neighborhood.

Instead of seeing drug dealing on every corner, he wanted to see shops and restaurants. He wanted better schools, safer streets.

They wanted to take the abandoned buildings and turn them into affordable housing for working families.

**HEMSLEY:** Our mission was to establish an Hispanic middle class.

**ROSE:** But to do that they would need real political power. And at the same time, there was another group looking at those same abandoned buildings but with a very different idea of how to use them.

## THE OTHER SIDE

**ROSE:** Is that him right there?

**ROSENFELD:** Probably.

**ROSE:** With the glasses?

**ROSENFELD:** Frank Morales is easy to spot. He's tall. He's got a long dark coat, a scarf and a black beret. His glasses have a little bit of tape holding them together.

**ROSENFELD:** I'm Nate. Nice to meet you.

**MORALES:** Hi Nate.

**ROSENFELD:** Sorry we're a little bit late. This is Emma.

**ROSE:** Hi, I'm Emma.

**ROSENFELD:** We walk into Tompkins Square Park. And Morales starts telling us about his life in the neighborhood.

**MORALES:** I've been living here pretty much most of my life. I was born and raised in the Jacob Riis projects on Avenue D and 12th Street.

**ROSE:** As a young adult, he moved around the city a bit, and when he came back in the 80s, he saw that the neighborhood had changed.

**MORALES:** It was pretty intense. I mean people from all over were coming to pick up drugs here. Go to Seventh Street, right between B and C here. It was known as the laundromat. And on a Friday night, there'd be like hundreds of people lining up to get cocaine or whatever they were getting, you know. From 14th Street to Houston. There were hundreds and hundreds of vacant buildings. There was a lot more wide open space back then.

**ROSE:** Frank had a vision for those vacant buildings. But his vision was different from Pagan's.

He saw their potential as a kind of haven, a place for people who had nowhere to go.

That's how Frank became involved in the squatters' movement on the Lower East Side. Here's how he defines squatting.

**MORALES:** The occupation of vacant space in the interest of creating homes with and for others. In other words, somebody who needs a house has a right. And squatting, you know, he puts flesh on the bones of the otherwise abstract human right to a home.

**ROSENFELD:** Back in the 80s, squatters didn't have any legal claim over the buildings. They just sort of moved in and took over.

Frank says, squatting was a beautiful way to live. A kind of utopia.

**MORALES:** I used to love—the hydrants would be left on. So it'd be like, that would be the stream coming by your front door. We would wash there, if we didn't have the running water going yet in the buildings. On a hot summer day everybody kind of gets together, so it was like that, you know, it's kind of, very communal.

**ROSE:** Squatting went hand in hand with another growing movement on the Lower East Side: anarchism. Anarchists believe that government control is a form of violence. They think that people would be better off if they could figure out how to take care of themselves.

Frank was both: a squatter and an anarchist. He says that the groups united around these abandoned buildings. Both used them to provide shelter for the poor and to create community spaces, like gardens and art galleries. And when either the city or private developers tried to take the buildings away from them, both groups saw it as a form of suppression. An attack on their way of life. And they were prepared to fight back.

# COMMUNITY BOARD 3 AND THE RIOT

**ROSENFELD:** Tompkins Square Park is in the center of the Lower East Side. It's about ten acres of grassy lawns and circular walkways.

There used to be a bandshell on the South side of the park. It was cement and had steps that went up to a large stage.

Bands used to play their concerts here at all hours of the night. Some people in the neighborhood thought it was out of control.

**RAMACI:** The word would go out that there was going to be a metal jam in Tompkins Square Park. And they always started around 10 or 11 at night, because they knew that was when people were going to try to go to sleep.

**ROSE:** That's Lisa Ramaci. She's lived a block away from the park for forty years.

**RAMACI:** They were literally all night long, hammers and sledgehammers, and bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, to just be fuck ups, to just keep everybody in the immediate vicinity awake, just in time for them to have to go to work, when they could go back to wherever they were living and sleep all day.

**ROSE:** People complained about the noise. Some even demanded a curfew. That way everything would shut down by 1 a.m.

But others didn't see the late night jamming as a problem. To them, the park was home. It was a thriving scene of art and counterculture.

**ROSENFELD:** Frank Morales grew up seeing shows at the bandshell.

**MORALES:** In the 60s, you know, Santana, and all these bands played there and so on. But it had juice live 24/7. The electric was always on, right? So if you're a band, can you imagine? I mean, in the summertime this is our, like, living room.

**ROSENFELD:** There were also unhoused people living in a different part of the park. They had set up encampments there because Tompkins Square was one of the only parks in the city that didn't enforce a curfew.

**RAMACI:** We were being singled out because the neighborhood was seen as poor, not really politically engaged, because you know, you have a lot of, you know, people in the projects and a lot of abandoned buildings. We were just sort of the bastard stepchild in this neighborhood. You know, the drug dealers, the filth, that disgusting, East Village slash Lower East Side, they're useless, we'll send the homeless down there.

**ROSENFELD:** By the Summer of 1988, people started petitioning the local community board to do something about the park.

**ROSE:** Community boards are the most local form of government in New York City.

Antonio Pagan was a member of Community Board 3. Pagan had made a big enough name for himself as a housing advocate to get a spot on the board.

Pagan agreed with many of his neighbors. He felt like the park was getting out of control. He was also in favor of enforcing a curfew in the park.

Community Board 3 took a vote. But the curfew didn't end up passing.

**ROSENFELD:** Pagan and his allies blamed its failure on a woman named Miriam Friedlander. She had been the district councilwoman for 17 years. And she had a lot of sway on the board. She opposed the idea of a curfew. She was a progressive politician and supported the community's right to stay in the park at all hours, especially the unhoused.

**ROSE:** There were some bitter debates over the curfew. Ultimately, a compromise was struck.

We went through Community Board 3's archives and found out that in June of 1988, they agreed to impose a noise curfew from midnight to 6 a.m.

The noise had to stop. But no one would be removed from the park.

After that agreement was reached, the community board started its summer recess.

Or at least, that's what was supposed to happen.

## **THE SECRET MEETING**

**DERIENZO:** And you'll never know the full story, alright.

**ROSENFELD:** That's Paul DeRienzo, again, the journalist and activist.

**DERIENZO:** The council woman at the time, Miriam Friedlander was on vacation in California, and while she was gone this guy Antonio Pagan decided now that the little red you know, the commie pinko was in California, he was gonna make his move, right.

**ROSENFELD:** He's saying he thinks Pagan called a secret meeting at the police precinct after the community board went on summer recess.

**DERIENZO:** And so he ordered, he took upon himself the power to order the police who seem to be willing to do it to come down here and to close the park.

**ROSENFELD:** Paul is alleging that Pagan and his allies on the community board agreed — in secret — to impose a curfew that would clear the park. And that the police would enforce it.

We know this meeting happened because we got the documentation from Paul.

He interviewed a woman who was at the meeting. And he gave us the tape.

**NEWMAN:** My name is Betsey Newman, I'm with the Friends of Tompkins Square Park.

**DERIENZO:** You were at a meeting. Can you give me the date and day the meeting?



**NEWMAN:** It was Tuesday, last Tuesday. What was that August 2? Yeah, at the district, Manhattan South Precinct Office.

**DERIENZO:** Who called the meeting?

**NEWMAN:** As far as I know, it was called by the police.

**DERIENZO:** How are people notified?

**NEWMAN:** Well, very few people were notified. I found out about it by accident, really, because I called the community board about something else about trees for the park. And Martha Danziger and I discussed the issue of trees.

**ROSE:** Martha Danziger was the head of Community Board 3 and an ally of Pagan's. We did get ahold of her, but she never agreed to be interviewed for the story.

**NEWMAN:** And then she said, Oh, and by the way, I'm glad you called because there's this meeting at six tonight. She said something to the effect of my understanding what she said was, we don't want any trouble. And I felt intimidated. I felt I was the only person there who wasn't in favor of the curfew. But my presence there was a tacit agreement to it. I was intimidated, there feeling alone, you know, and feeling I hadn't been notified and time to call the people who needed to be there with me. And I didn't pop up and say, you know, "no, we've been fighting this for years," which we have.

**DERIENZO:** How many people—who was there?

**NEWMAN:** I have the list. I'll give you a copy of it. I made a copy of it.

**DERIENZO:** Thank you very much.

**NEWMAN:** Yes I made some copies of it just in case.

**ROSE:** Paul still has the list of people who were at that meeting. We went to his apartment, and he pulled it out of a big binder to show to us.

**DERIENZO:** These are the people who were at the meeting on August 2, 1988.

**ROSEFIELD:** The list has 24 names on it. They're people from the local police department, the community board, a local block association. Most of these people — except for Betsey — were in favor of the curfew. But there's one name missing: Pagan's. When we were looking through Paul's files, Emma was the first person to notice that his name wasn't on the list. You can hear her faintly in the background.

**DERIENZO:** So all these people were at this meeting a few days before the riot.

**ROSE:** Pagan wasn't there.

**DERIENZO:** And I have the signature with the signup sheet with the signatures. No, Pagan was not there. You're right.

**ROSE:** So Pagan was blamed for the curfew in Tompkins Square Park. The curfew that led to one of the worst police riots in New York City's history. But at the meeting where this curfew was decided, Pagan wasn't even there.

## THE RIOT

[Protestors chanting, "It's our fucking park." Bang! Screams.]

**ROSE:** Word started to go around that a curfew was going to be enforced in the park, so protesters showed up to fight it. They held up signs saying "Gentrification is class war. Fight back" and gathered at the entrance of the park.

**ROSENFELD:** Clayton Patterson, a video artist from the neighborhood, recorded what he saw that night.

[Protesters screaming. Bang! Screams]

**ROSENFELD:** That's his tape you're hearing. He filmed a cop jamming his nightstick between the spokes of a man's bicycle tires. Another cop jumps on the man when he falls. People are walking around with bloodied skulls. A photographer gets slammed against a wall.

**ROSE:** At first, the narrative among city officials was that the protesters had been violent and the police had simply done their jobs. But when Clayton Patterson's footage was released, the whole story flipped.

**BROWDE:** There is a substantial difference between what top city officials are saying tonight about the riot near Tompkins Square Park and what they said yesterday.

**WARD:** There is some behavior that was captured on tape that I think the individual officers involved are going to have a great deal of trouble explaining why they used the amount of force they were using.

**ROSENFELD:** An investigation was launched into police misconduct. In response, the NYPD told investigators that they had been called there by local leaders to enforce a curfew in the park. But were these leaders really speaking for the community? Or had they decided themselves to clear the park in that secret meeting?

35 years later, what we can say for sure is that the riot in Tompkins Square Park changed the fate of the Lower East Side.

And when the camera crews went away, the war for control of the park dragged on. And Antonio Pagan would decide to step right into the center of it.

## **PAGAN'S CITY COUNCIL RUN**

**ROSE:** After the riot, Miriam Friedlander, the city councilwoman, railed against the use of force by the police. She called the police's actions an attack on the poor living in the park, who had been forced out during the riot.

And so Friedlander called for social services to be brought into Tompkins Square Park. The noise curfew was done away with. And Community Board 3 voted to

protect the right of unhoused people to stay in the park at night. After that, unhoused people from all around the city started coming to the park. Tents filled the lawns. Frank Morales and other anarchists saw this as a victory for their movement. They started organizing the encampments.

**MORALES:** It was like Hooverville, but it was also like Woodstock. It was very cool. Again it showed you what the possibilities are if people work together.

**ROSE:** Howard Hemsley says Miriam Friedlander wasn't really interested in making the park better.

**HEMSLEY:** Her philosophy was better a slum than the gentry. And she did nothing.

**ROSENFELD:** Better a slum than the gentry. In Howard's view, it was time for Friedlander to go. The only way to bring the changes he and Antonio Pagan wanted for the neighborhood was to force her out of office.

Howard thought that maybe, if they could rally the large Hispanic community in the neighborhood, they might be able to defeat her.

**HEMSLEY:** I thought Antonio is just the person.

**ROSENFELD:** He was hispanic. He built housing, which was a big issue in the Hispanic community. Howard talked it over with Pagan, and Pagan agreed.

But Miriam Friedlander had been in office for nearly two decades. Pagan was going to need more name recognition and stronger support in the community to defeat her. And they weren't exactly sure how to get it.

**ROSE:** Then, one day, Howard's phone rang. It was a man named Sam Turvey. Sam was a lawyer who lived right on the park. And he had been fighting for the noise curfew all summer.

**TURVEY:** Working class poor communities, they need a park. You can't just decide, well, I'm going to show everybody what it's all about by just letting anarchy and chaos happen there.

**ROSE:** After the riot, Sam found a flier posted at his dry cleaners about BASTA, Howard and Pagan's shelter organization. He knew Howard and Pagan were pushing hard to clean up the neighborhood, so he took down Howard's number.

He gave him a call, and the two men talked about how to bring about the changes they wanted to see in the neighborhood. Howard realized there was an opportunity for Pagan.

He figured if Pagan could position himself right in the middle of the park battle, he might be able to build a coalition strong enough to defeat Friedlander. And they knew they needed someone like Sam Turvey in their corner.

**TURVEY:** I was really hesitant to do this because at the time, the narrative was die yuppie scum. And yuppies are trying to gentrify the neighborhood. We've got to let the homeless live in the park because the yuppies are trying to throw them out. And I said to Howard and Antonio, I said, I'm like out of central casting. I worked for a firm called Lord Day & Lord, my wife worked for Citibank.

**ROSENFELD:** Sam didn't want to be the face of the movement. But Pagan could be. Pagan was a Puerto Rican New Yorker, so it would be harder for the other side to accuse them of being allied with the gentrifiers.

**TURVEY:** And they said to me, they said, you know something Sam, no actually we need both of you and Antonio to be co-coordinators. The powers that be. They will say they care about minorities and Puerto Ricans, they really don't. They want to hear from you. And our job is to win. So, you know, you may catch some grief for who you are, but we want you involved.

**ROSENFELD:** So that's what they decided: Pagan would be their voice in the community, and Sam would be the voice in the ear of city officials.

**ROSE:** The group started to put fliers under their neighbors' doors, host meetings and send press releases. Pagan spoke forcefully about the issue. Here he is on the nightly news in 1991, talking about the effort to clean up Tompkins Square Park.

**PAGAN:** This park has been used as the scapegoat for the city agencies to dump every unwanted element from every other public space in the Lower East Side. They push them out of Grand Central Station. They push them out of Penn Station. They push them out of Central Park. They push them out of City Hall Park. But they say it's okay to dump them on the Lower East Side. The question here is who has decided that the poor and working poor Ukrainian, Polish and Puerto Rican community from the Lower East Side have less of a right to a quality of life and to the only recreational facility we have than any other sector of the city.

**ROSENFELD:** To the Lower East Siders who felt like the park was out of control, Antonio Pagan was becoming their champion. But some people who disagreed with his vision for the park saw him as a threat. To the other side, he was the poster boy for the forces trying to tear their neighborhood away from them.

# THE UGLINESS OF THE PARK BATTLE

**FLASH:** We're covering things from a point of view that the mainstream media will not cover, or they'll misreport it, or they'll distort it.

**ROSE:** I'm in the basement office of the newspaper The Shadow. Chris Flash, the founder, is seated at his desk. There are towering stacks of old editions of the paper on the floor beside him. Old brown news clippings and photographs cover every inch of the walls.

The Shadow is an anarchist newspaper that covers the Lower East Side. After the riot in Tompkins Square Park, Chris Flash used his platform to blast the city and local leaders for what happened that night. He said the riot was an attack on the homeless. And it was proof that the effort to clean up the park was just a ploy to pave the way for gentrification.

**FLASH:** They're not supposed to be beating up the homeless. They're not supposed to be evicting squat builds. They're not supposed to be enforcing park curfews and beating the shit out of people.

**ROSENFELD:** The Shadow's reporters started pointing the finger at Antonio Pagan. They said Pagan's talk about cleaning up the park for the community was just a way to jack up property values and push out the unhoused. That he was a force for gentrification in the neighborhood. Flash thought that Pagan's rhetoric about helping the working class and building low income housing was just a tactic to get into office.

**FLASH:** But he did his job with gusto. He didn't really stand to lose anything. For one thing, he gets political clout, political power, he's able to enrich his friends with real estate holdings from the city's vast holdings of properties.



**CASTRUCCI:** Antonio Pagan was a typical liar politician, to use the poor, to use his native Latino roots, you know, to exploit, you know, but he was a prop. He was a real estate prop.

**ROSE:** That's Andrew Castrucci. He was a squatter on the Lower East Side.

**CASTRUCCI:** He's using the squatters as his political football to get elected. And to clean up Tompkins Square Park. But he's basically a poverty pimp, Antonio Pagan.

**ROSE:** This term poverty pimps was also used in the Shadow's coverage.

**FLASH:** Poverty pimps, Blacks and Hispanics and other political groups, like ethnic people who were really controlled by white people who pulled the money strings. Look, we're making housing for the homeless. No, you're not. You're putting people on a 10-year waiting list to get housing here at what you call as affordable is actually unaffordable for the average New Yorker, whereas squatters are creating immediate housing for people with zero income.

**ROSE:** But Pagan didn't cower from these attacks. If he was going to get hit, he was going to hit back twice as hard.

**PAGAN:** When we talk about squatting, let's look at the track record.

**ROSE:** Here is Pagan on a local television show, talking about the squatters.

**PAGAN:** The majority of buildings that your advocates have taken over are either on their way down burned down or falled down. The buildings that you've targeted to take over and made fuses about have been buildings with full financing in place to provide services to the community. There's something wrong in your rhetoric. What you say and what you do doesn't match.

**ROSENFELD:** But this battle between Pagan and his allies vs. the squatters and the anarchists, it wasn't purely rhetorical.

Pagan's opponents shouted him down and put up posters of Pagan's face with devil horns. They'd throw eggs and firecrackers at residents who spoke out. Fights would break out. The police were brought in for protection.

**TURVEY:** They did some pretty terrible things. There was a local Hispanic woman, her daughter was in the park and got pricked with a hypodermic needle and she went to the community board and spoke and complained. And they followed her home and they like threatened her life.

**ROSE:** This was Lisa Ramaci's experience after she spoke out against the squatters at community board meetings.

**RAMACI:** We used to get phone calls at three o'clock in the morning, they had one of those voice altering machines, and they would call us up at 3 a.m. and threaten our lives. And, you know, we're gonna kill you. We're going to fuck you up. We know where you live.

There was one time I was here alone. It was a Saturday morning. Beautiful Saturday, sunny. The phone rings. I pick it up and it's this anarchist named Aaron. And he must think he has the voice scrambler on but he doesn't. And I recognize his voice. So he goes, you fucking cunt. You fucking bitch. We're going to kill you.

I have a bullet that's got your name carved and it's gonna go straight into your back.

**ROSE:** She was also threatened with sexual violence in a very graphic way.

**RAMACI:** And I'm just listening to him. And finally he stopped and I went oh, hey, Aaron, how you doing? And there was this like silence on the other end. He suddenly slammed the phone down because he realized he hadn't put the voice scrambler on. But this is what we were dealing with.

**ROSE:** As the fighting dragged on, the conditions in the park were deteriorating.

**RAMACI:** There were over 400 homeless people living in it. And they were doing everything that they would have done otherwise they were fucking in it. They were shitting in public. They were shooting up on the benches. They were ripping apart the benches to set on fire for heat when it was cold. The place stank. I mean you couldn't even, in the summertime, you couldn't even walk on the east side of Avenue A because of the stench coming out of it.

**ROSE:** Frank Morales had been organizing the encampments in the park. But he said the support system they were trying to build fell apart.

**MORALES:** Over time, I think it really began to become more than we could handle. It created openings for the likes of Pagan. Needles found in the sand pit at the children's playground, this kind of stuff. It was a difficult situation. It was a danger. And that had to be dealt with. So it created the opportunity for them to come back.

**ROSENFELD:** As the conditions in the park got worse, Pagan's efforts started to resonate with more and more residents in the neighborhood.

And the Summer of 1991 put the final nail in the coffin.

Another riot broke out in Tompkins Square Park.

And the Mayor's office was forced to step in.

The city swept the encampments of people living in the park. A curfew was enforced. And the park was closed for two years for reconstruction.

**MORALES:** A lot of the people were burning their own tents and their own places. It was really tragic. It was kind of like Dante's Inferno or something, you know, the whole place was smoking. Cops were everywhere, people were with their few belongings that they didn't want to burn, you know, it was really bad.

**ROSE:** After years of struggle, the battle for Tompkins Square Park was over.

Pagan's side had won.

As this was all happening, Pagan's campaign for City Council was in full swing. The park was a crucial talking point. It was evidence he could make the city listen and bring change to the neighborhood.

**ROSENFELD:** The Pagan campaign brought together the Puerto Rican and Eastern European communities in the neighborhood. He also rallied the support of small business owners.

**RAMACI:** What we had on our side was righteous fury. It was like Nixon's silent majority. We knew that more people in this neighborhood were against the anarchists than were for them but didn't have the courage, the time, the physical capability or the mental willingness to take them on.

**ROSE:** It was an uphill battle to defeat Friedlander. But Pagan managed to beat the odds. He won by just 121 votes.

**PAGAN:** Nuestra fuerza es nuestra diversidad. Our strength is our diversity.

**ROSE:** Pagan emerged from the campaign as a force to be reckoned with. He had brought together a whole new coalition of voters. Fought off a long-term incumbent. And resisted hostile attacks by his opponents. It seemed like the sky was the limit for him.

**RAMACI:** We were thrilled. I mean, we felt like Sisyphus, you know, we'd been rolling this giant boulder up a mountain and this boulder was like having an all night metal jam on top of it and all of a sudden we could let the boulder go. I mean, granted, it was definitely not the end of the anarchists. But we knew that things would start to change with somebody like Antonio as the city councilperson.

**ROSE:** But now that Pagan had real political power, what was he going to do with it?

# THE FALL

**ROSENFELD:** When Pagan got on the city council, he was determined to carry out his plan for the neighborhood. He wanted it to be a safe, stable place for working class families to live.

Pagan partnered with non-profit organizations to build affordable housing in the neighborhood. These new buildings would allow people to rent, or even buy, their own apartment based on their income.

**ROSE:** The only problem was that many of these lots weren't actually empty. They had been taken over by the squatters and turned into shelters and community gardens. So when Pagan said that he was going to tear down these spaces for development, there were conflicts. And the two sides never sat down together to hash things out. Pagan and his people just pushed forward with the plans. Here's George Rodriguez again.

**ROSENFELD:** If you had to imagine what a sit down meeting with them would be like, What do you think would have...?

**RODRIGUEZ:** It would have lasted 30 seconds. That's it. Hello. A couple of expletives. Goodbye. And that's it.

**ROSE:** Pagan's friend, George Rodriguez, had become his Chief of Staff.

**RODRIGUEZ:** He wasn't out there trying to appeal and appease everyone. You know, he knew in his heart, what was the right thing to do, what were the right positions to take, and he would defend it.

**ROSE:** Howard Hemsley, who was also working for Pagan's administration, put it more bluntly.

**ROSENFELD:** What was Antonio's attitude?

**HEMSLEY:** Fuck em. They're the enemy. I will crush them.

**ROSE:** In 1995, the city condemned a squat on 13th Street, and Pagan got financing to build income based housing there. But for the squatters, this new affordable housing was about to put them out on the street. They organized and fought back.

They started a giant bonfire in the middle of the street to stop the cops from pulling up.

But the cops eventually did pull up...in a tank.

**RODRIGUEZ:** See the top of that tan building there? That's the famous photo with a police commissioner is standing on the rooftop with his binoculars, looking at the tank roll down the street.

**ROSENFELD:** Police helicopters circled over the block. The squatters used oil slicks, boards with nails, and trip wires to try to keep the police at bay. People locked arms and formed a human chain around the building. They welded steel plates over the entrances to barricade themselves inside. 31 people were arrested for trying to keep the police out of the building.

In the end, Pagan's plans went forward. And the building was turned into affordable housing.

**ROSE:** Pagan ran for a second term on City Council, and this time, he won by several thousand votes. But he started to alienate some of his closest allies.

Howard felt that Pagan was starting to put himself above the people working for him. During the first few meetings he sat in on, he said Pagan kept his staff waiting in the room while he took phone calls.

**HEMSLEY:** That's the way a Generalissimo operates.

**ROSENFELD:** That's the way a Generalissimo operates, Howard says.

**HEMSLEY:** And I did not operate like that. We parted company.

**ROSENFELD:** Howard stopped working for Pagan. He and Lisa Ramaci told us that Pagan wanted to be the first Hispanic mayor of New York. So instead of seeking a third term on the City Council, he decided to run for Manhattan Borough President in 1997. The natural next step.

**ROSE:** During the campaign for Borough President, the controversy surrounding Antonio Pagan followed close behind. The New York Times wrote about this upstart candidate, that his "caustic style [had] earned him scores of enemies."



**RAMACI:** His campaign for borough president. I just, I didn't think it was a good idea from the beginning. I just thought to myself, this is a mistake. I thought that he set himself up to fall.

**ROSE:** Pagan was a guest on Brian Lehrer's morning radio show to promote his campaign. And his hecklers couldn't resist an opportunity to badger him.

**LEHRER:** One more call, Arrow on the Lower East Side, you're on the line.

**ARROW:** Hi, Brian. I'd like to ask Antonio Pagan a couple of questions this morning. I'd like to ask him why he fought so hard to evict squatters and poor people from the Lower East Side in order to build luxury housing.

**PAGAN:** It's refreshing to hear from you Arrow. Arrow is a squatter that's been living illegally in our city owned buildings. The squatters that have come here to play out their political fantasies have been stealing from the poor of the neighborhood, standing in the way of the development of affordable housing for the poor and working poor here. The housing that's being developed on 13th Street is for poor and working poor, and many homeless families. But that's not what it's about. It's about free rent, free real estate, and whatever the misled political agendas are.

**ARROW:** I'm proud of being able to renovate abandoned, rejected housing [Pagan: it's called stealing from the poor] that was otherwise would have gone to waste, the only would have gone to some real estate scheme by someone like Antonio Pagan to get rich on the back of the poor and working class people on the Lower East Side.

**PAGAN:** Brian, the housing is being developed by not for profit agencies that are ruled by the state laws. And for the poor working poor of this community, not luxury housing, like Mr. Arrow will lead you to believe.

**ROSE:** Pagan lost the Democratic primary. Out of 4 candidates, he came in last.

**ROSENFELD:** He decided not to run again for City Council. Instead, he took an appointment at Rudy Giuliani's Department of Employment. Pagan had backed Giuliani for mayor, and Giuliani returned the favor.

After serving as Employment Commissioner for five years, Pagan's job ended.

He wanted a break from politics. He enrolled in culinary school. But soon, the people in his life started to notice him struggling.

**ROSE:** Ramaci said that after all those years being the hero and the villain of the neighborhood, the strain was starting to catch up to him.

**RAMACI:** Nobody enjoys, you know, getting phone calls saying we're gonna fuck you up. We're gonna kill you. But some of the people were more impacted than others. And Antonio was one of them. I mean, you know, he started to develop a bit of a drinking problem. You had to be tough to live in this neighborhood in those days. It was not for the faint of heart. Antonio was a very sensitive man. I don't want to say that he was afraid of them. Because that wasn't it. But he took what they said to him, sometimes a little too much to heart. And it did affect him physically. I mean, towards the end of his life, he put on a great deal of weight. He didn't know where to go. So Antonio was just sort of left rudderless.

**ROSE:** Pagan started to isolate himself. And many of his friends lost touch. The last time Howard Hemsley saw Pagan, the two just nodded to each other in the street.

**ROSENFELD:** Some people we spoke with said that Pagan had existing health conditions. Others said they were made worse by his drinking. George Rodriguez stayed close with Pagan when he started to get sick. He would take him to his doctor's appointments and help him run errands.

One night in January 2009, George was out with his friends, and he had forgotten to charge his phone. When he came back home and went to sleep, he woke the next morning to a bunch of messages telling him that Pagan had died in the hospital the night before.

**ROSE:** Antonio Pagan was 50 years old.

There was a gathering in Tompkins Square Park. Some of the anarchists had come to celebrate his death. Chris Flash wrote up his death in the paper, basically saying good riddance.

**FLASH:** Why should an evil person dying in a bad way be deified? Oh it's such a shame he died. No fuck you. You're an evil piece of shit. You're dead. I'm happy you're dead. How many people's lives did he ruin? On his way clawing his way to the top and he didn't even get to the top. How many people were displaced? The squatters on 13th Street, we're not just a bunch of fucking hippie freaks and squatter punks and alleged drug users. It was families, kids, and artists and writers, it was a wonderful thing. Okay, maybe they weren't fancy and glitzy and spick and span, you know, clean and gentrified, looking or homogenized, or sanitized. But it was a real functioning, you know, community, there are five buildings where everybody looked out for each other, worked together. It was a safe haven for everybody. It was a really wonderful thing.

**ROSE:** For Chris Flash and many of the anarchists, Pagan's legacy is the destruction of the squats and the gentrification of the Lower East Side. Like the squat on 13th that got evicted with the help of the police tank.

[Footsteps]

**ROSENFELD:** We asked George Rodriguez to take us on a walk through the neighborhood, to show us Pagan's legacy from his perspective. We made our way down the six blocks from 13th Street to the bottom of Tompkins Square Park.

**RODRIGUEZ:** So they're multi-family like townhouses.

**ROSENFELD:** And on every block...

**RODRIGUEZ:** This was an abandoned parking lot. Right here. And this is also Partnership Housing.

**ROSENFELD:** Oh yeah, it looks the same.

**ROSENFELD:** There were dozens of homes that Pagan had built.

**RODRIGUEZ:** Some more up this way. On 11. A couple more here.

**ROSENFELD:** All of them, low and middle income housing.

**ROSENFELD:** I just can't get over how beautiful these buildings are. They're like, there's these beautiful trees flowering in front...

**ROSENFELD:** They're simple buildings. They don't stand out from the other post-war brownstones on the block. But they have little terraces, solid brickwork, nice gardens out front.

**ROSE:** The buildings are squeezed in between rows and rows of other buildings — ones that aren't rent stabilized. Apartments going for thousands of dollars. George scoffed at all the newcomers paying a fortune to live there. He said the neighborhood he grew up in — the neighborhood he spent all those years fighting for — it's not here anymore.

**RODRIGUEZ:** We both lost. If I look at it today, both sides lost. The neighborhood got radically gentrified. We lost a lot of the uniqueness of the East Village. It's just, money won out. Money won out.

**ROSENFELD:** Do you think Antonio anticipated this sort of sweeping force of gentrification?

**RODRIGUEZ:** Nobody did. No. Cleaning up and stabilizing a neighborhood is one thing. Up-pricing, rezoning, gentrification at the scale we've seen is another.

**ROSE:** But the squatters anticipated it.

[Sound of protesters chanting, "it's our fucking park"]

**ROSE:** That's what they said they were fighting against that night in 1988, when a riot broke out in Tompkins Square Park. And in all the years that followed.

## CREDITS

**ROSE:** Shoe Leather is a production of the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism. This episode was reported, written and produced by Emma Rose and Nate Rosenfield.

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