

10-85

By Yuchen Li and Lina Fansa

Over 400 police officers clashed with 200 civilians on the streets of the Lower East Side, in the late hours of August 6, 1988.

Ralph Grasso, a retired NYPD officer, take us back to one of the most notorious nights in New York city history, the Tompkins Square park riot. Months after the riot, Ralph himself was in deep trouble.

In this episode, we hear an NYPD's perspective of what happened the night policing and crowd control methods changed forever. It was a year where hand held video cameras were used, where hours of footage captured behaviour that left a stain on the NYPD for a long time to come.

TRANSCRIPT

FANSA: It's midnight. August 6, 1988. Police have been ordered to clear Tompkins Square Park on the Lower East Side. They are enforcing a 1 AM curfew. And hundreds of people have shown up to protest.

Archive: ([FOX 5 New York](#))

Tape (Paul Garrin): Alright, alright. I'm getting down. I'm getting down.

FANSA: A young man stands on top of a car, holding a camera and filming the scene.

Tape (Paul Garrin): I'm getting down. I'm getting down! I'm getting down!

FANSA: There's an NYPD officer at the foot of the car. He looks to be in his early twenties. Has a white grin and mustache – he charges and swings his nightstick from left to right, his elbow in snapped motion. Then back right to the left.

Tape (Paul Garrin): Give me a chance! I didn't do anything! Give me a chance!

FANSA: Five more cops gather around the car. Their hands and night sticks poke out from the corner of the lens. The photographer jumps off the car to the ground. Suddenly the video's gone – there's just static.

Archive: ([FOX 5 New York](#)) The photographer was beaten badly by officers as his camera rolled on.

LI: He was just one of dozens of people — reporters and protestors — beaten by the cops that night.

LI: In the following 24 hours, citizens would file 121 complaints against the cops.

Archive: ([FOX 5 New York](#)): At first, city officials were not very sympathetic to cries of police brutality during the Sunday morning riot in Tompkins Square Park but that has changed now that the mayor and police commissioner have seen some home videos of what happened.

Archive: (FOX 5 New York): There is some behavior that was captured on tape that I think the individual officers that are involved are going to have some great difficulty explaining why they were using the amount of force that they were using at that particular time.

LI: The violent clash between the police and protestors would come to be known as the Tompkins Square Park Police Riot. So we wanted to know...

MUSIC STARTS (SHOE LEATHER THEME MUSIC)

LI: Why did the police respond with such brutal force?

FANSA: I'm Lina Fansa.

LI: And I'm Yuchen Li.

FANSA: This is Shoe Leather. An investigative podcast that digs up stories from New York City's past to find out how yesterday's news affects us today. This season, we go back to 1988. And the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The area was filled with music, art, and anarchists. They were young, wild, and free.

LI: And not willing to follow anyone's rules. Not even the cops. Ralph Grasso was there that night. A rookie officer. And one of the cops swinging his nightstick.

Tape (Ralph Grasso): I didn't do anything wrong, but I went through the process and I was found guilty of something.

FANSA: This is Shoe Leather season 4: "It's Our Fucking Park".

LI: And You're listening to "10-85".

MUSIC OUT

DESTINED TO BE A COP

SOUND OF PARK AND WIND

Tape (Lina Fansa): I'm here facing the bridge in the parking lot.

FANSA: I go to Queens, to meet Ralph Grasso on a Wednesday in March. He tells me to meet him at the parking lot in Astoria Park. And after a few minutes of waiting, I see a large man approach me.

FANSA: I know it's him by the way he walks and carries himself. It's just like a cop.

Tape (Lina Fansa): Hi Ralph. Nice to meet you, finally. I'm good, how are you?

FANSA: Ralph is wearing dark-washed jeans and a gray fleece – tight enough to show the silhouette of his biceps – at 57 years old, he still body builds and wants others to know it.

FANSA: When he walks up to me, He asks for my ID.

Tape (Ralph Grasso): You have ID on you?

FANSA: I crack a joke about my old hairstyle in the picture.

FANSA: He laughs. And then takes off his beanie to reveal his bright bald head.

Tape (Ralph Grasso): I don't have hair now. But back then, I had plenty of blonde hair so that I was built big. And they would call me He-man.

Archive ([He-man](#)): Fabulous secret powers were revealed to me the day I held aloft my magic sword!

FANSA: He-man was a cartoon character superhero with protruding muscles, a 16-pack and blonde hair. Popular back in the 80s.

Archive ([He-man](#)): I have the power!

FANSA: Like He-man, Ralph Grasso also wanted to fight evil.

Tape (Ralph Grasso): Yeah, I wanted to make...I mean, it's a cliché thing, I wanted to make a difference. But I wanted to move up. I didn't want to just be...I just didn't want to just be a police officer. I knew I had some sort of gift.

FANSA: He knew he was destined to be a cop. His father made sure of that.

Tape (Ralph Grasso): Well, my father would come home with many applications, put them in front of me. He would tell me fill them out. Because there's only two ways you're gonna go: you're going to become something that has a pension and a career. Or I see you getting into trouble.

FANSA: And in the summer of 1987, Ralph made his way to the NYPD. He was 21 years old.

Tape (Ralph Grasso): The first day I wore that uniform for graduation...And...It's gonna actually get me emotional. Just to see the look in my parents eyes, like you know: success.

FANSA: He tears up. Looks away from me. And presses his thumb into his eye.

Tape (Ralph Grasso): I took the ownership of that uniform seriously. I took it as I'm representing not only NYPD but I represented the city, representing my family and representing myself.

FANSA: He remembers his first day in the line of duty. He walked into the office and met his supervisor, an old-timer.

Tape (Ralph Grasso): He said, he said, "Hey, how'd you get here today?" And I was like, "I drove my car". He's like, "You drove your call with your shirt on?"

FANSA: With his police shirt on – meaning, he'd driven to work wearing his uniform. Something cops weren't supposed to do back then – it just invited trouble.

Tape (Ralph Grasso): Remember, this is...this is a time that was...it was busy.

FANSA: What Ralph means by busy is a lot of crime – rapes, murders, assaults – New York was in the middle of a crime wave. This was how he described it to me and Yuchen, when we both sat down with him for another interview.

Tape (Ralph Grasso): It was a shithole, it was dirty.. Yeah, it was like it's like nobody cared.

Tape (Yuchen Li): Did you care?

Tape (Ralph Grasso): Of course I cared.

Tape (Yuchen Li): Why?

Tape (Ralph Grasso): That's why I took the job.

FANSA: The job he dedicated himself to for more than 30 years.

Tape (Ralph Grasso): I knew this is where I belonged...if I could do it all over again, from day one, would I be the same.

MUSIC STARTS

FANSA: Ralph Grasso would say those words again – that he wouldn't change a thing. Not even on the night that he put his job, his future and his freedom on the line.

ROOKIE COPS FIGHTING THE WAR ON CRACK

LI: To understand what happened on the night of the Tompkins Square Park Police Riot, you have to understand the tensions that had been building for decades in New York — between the police and the public.

LI: And a lot of that story starts in the 1960s.

MUSIC OUT

Archive ([Vietnam War Protest in NYC 1967](#)): Anti-war demonstrators protest U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War in mass marches, rallies, and demonstrations.

LI: The antiwar movement raged across the country. And mass protests were common in New York City.

Archive ([Vietnam War Protest in NYC 1967](#)): The estimated 125,000 Manhattan marchers, including students, poets, doctors, businessmen, teachers, priests, and nuns.

LI: And sometimes those protests turned destructive.

Archive ([Vietnam War Protest in NYC 1967](#)): Before the parade, mass car burning was urged. Demonstrators claimed 200 cars were burned, but no accurate count could be determined. Reporters and onlookers were jostled away on purpose. Although mostly peaceful, shouted confrontations were frequent and fiery during the course of the march.

Tape (John Monaghan): They became quite prevalent, and there was a lot of riot response and control that the NYPD engaged in throughout the 1960s.

LI: That's John Monaghan. He's a former NYPD captain. He served for two decades in the department. Nowadays, he testifies as an expert on police procedure.

Tape (John Monaghan): That changed in the 1970s. Didn't see as much of that. // The anti-war protests had ended. And large-scale riots and protests had ended.

LI: What started instead, was a fiscal crisis in the city. Basically, New York was broke. And to help cut costs, the city laid off 5,000 cops.

FANSA: From July 1975 until November 1979, no police officers were hired or trained in the City of New York.

Tape (John Monaghan): They didn't rehire police until the early 1980s. They were very short-handed. And crime had gone bad. So they began to hire to rebuild it back to the place where it needed to be.

Tape (John Monaghan): And from 1980 to 1988, they re-outfitted almost half of the department. They hired 17 to 18,000 cops in that period of time.

FANSA: That meant lots of new cops with pretty much no experience. Rookies working with other rookies. It also meant there was a growing number of civilian complaints about police brutality.

Tape (Howard French): Almost every week in that era, there were community protests about police behavior.

FANSA: Howard French is a professor at Columbia Journalism School. He covered New York City local news in the '80s.

Tape (Howard French): It was certainly not uncommon to find instances where the police behave with a lot of aggressiveness and sometimes brutality toward protesters. // The police took a sort of almost sometimes quasi-military approach to handling what they saw as civilian unrest.

LI: Then, in early 1988, tensions escalated even more.

LI: One day, in February of that year, Edward Byrne was sitting in his police car in Queens. He was 22 years old, and a rookie with the NYPD. He was working a drug case, and protecting a witness. That's when someone approached his vehicle and shot him 5 times, killing him.

LI: Thousands of police officers attended his funeral.

Archive ([Matthew Byrne](#)): My son Eddie, sitting in a police car, representing and protecting us, can be wasted by scum, then none of us is safe.

FANSA: The NYPD was livid. They vowed to come down even harder on what they blamed for Byrne's murder. Which was the all-out drug war that was consuming New York in the 80s.

Archive ([ABC7](#)): Some people call it the largest crack house in the city. It's five blocks of projects, drugs, and crime. It's a place that even frightens cops.

Archive ([Channel 7 News](#)): I get scared, but i have to do my job as a police officer.

FANSA: Crack was the drug of choice – a derivative of cocaine. It hits the bloodstream in seconds. And the city, and the police, were losing the war against it. Especially on the Lower East Side.

FANSA: In an editorial in New York Amsterdam News in the summer of 1988, Wilbert Tatum described the East Village as teeming with people who were buying and selling crack.

MUSIC STARTS

FANSA: "It is 5:00 a.m. in the East Village," Tatum wrote, "At this moment, there are hundreds of them, and no attempt is being made to hide their commerce."

FANSA: “People are defecating between the dumpsters that are filled with raw garbage and rotting food that gives the neighborhood the smell of death,”

LI: So that’s the backdrop to what happened later that year, in August of 1988. Decades of clashes between the police and the public. Accusations of police brutality. A raging drug war. The murder of a police officer. An agitated police department, filled with inexperienced cops.

Tape (John Monaghan): So what you had on that night in August of 1988 were police officers with no experience regarding protests and riots.

LI: Officer Ralph Grasso would be one of those cops.

MUSIC OUT

THE RIOT

SOUNDS OF HARLEM STREETS DURING A BLACK OUT IN 1988

FANSA: It was a soaking hot night on August 6th, 1988. Ralph Grasso was on the Manhattan North Task Force.

FANSA: He and some other officers were trying to keep things calm in Harlem, where there was a blackout. .

Archive ([Historical Films](#)): Now we're dealing with a blackout from 111 Street to 116th Street. And we're putting out lights to try to light it up, prevent looting, keep everybody safe.

LI: In the meantime, they were also on stand-by for growing tensions at Tompkins Square Park. Which had been brewing for over a week.

Tape (Ed Patterson): Maybe two, three nights in a row. They said, Oh, we're on alert again, for Tompkins Square Park.

LI: Ed Patterson joined the NYPD in 1982, when he was 20 years old. He also worked with the Manhattan North Task Force — Ralph's same unit. He was also on duty that night.

Tape (Ed Patterson): Alert just means listen up. You may be going somewhere tonight. We didn't think we're ever gonna go down there because I told him, we were on alert for a couple of nights before that.

LI: The usual shift was from 6 pm to 2 am. It was already midnight.

Tape (Ed Patterson): We were kind of hoping like, you know, hopefully we didn't get called because we just wanted to do what tomorrow and go home that night and get out of here...A lot of guys that night were like shit, I'm tired. Man was a long night...Last night we worked hours into the morning.

FANSA: But the night was about to get longer.

FANSA: When a signal code came through the radio transmission.

Tape (Ed Patterson): I don't think any of us knew like what the hell was going on.

FANSA: Ralph remembers it too.

Tape (Ralph Grasso): We got a call to go down to Manhattan South that there was a disturbance. And it was Tompkins Square Park.

FANSA: The code was a "10-85, Forthwith".

FANSA: Meaning, Need Additional Units, ASAP.

MUSIC STARTS

LI: The after-action report shows the call happened at 12:52 a.m. It was from Captain Gerald McNamara, the Commanding Officer of the region. He requested responses from Manhattan North and Brooklyn North Task Forces.

FANSA: Two hours later, Captain McNamara made another call. All remaining Borough Task Force Units requested to respond.

LI: Ralph Grasso and Ed Patterson were among the 400 officers who made their way down to the Lower East Side.

Tape (Ralph Grasso): We had to respond because the Manhattan South Task Force, at the time, were dealing with a large crowd. So we went down there, and they were right.

MUSIC OUT

Tape (Clayton Patterson's archive): It's our fucking park!

FANSA: Paul DeRenzo was an activist and citizen journalist back then. He documented that night by narrating what he saw into his tape recorder.

Tape (Paul DeRienzo's archive): We've been pushed down to East 9th Street there's police now in the street a large number of undercover police wearing helmets.

Tape (Ed Patterson): I don't think any of our guys realize how big of a thing this was ever going to be.

Tape (Ed Patterson): Because a buddy of ours that used to work in our command was now in a city wide unit. And he was there and he worked in Brooklyn. I never forgot. I said to him, I go, what are you doing here? And he goes, they bringing guys in from the Rockaways for this thing. And I was like, Holy shit, I didn't realise like how big it was, whatever.

Tape (Clayton Patterson's archive): We want the park! We want the park!

Tape (Ed Patterson): When we pulled up that night. It just seemed like the shit hit the fan right away.

LI: What Ed means is that protesters weren't leaving the park without a fight. They saw the city's new 1 AM curfew to clear the park as the final straw in a long battle over gentrification in the Lower East Side. So they were ready for the cops.

Tape (Clayton Patterson's archive): Get out the park you pigs! Get out of here!

Tape (Ed Patterson): Usually when we'd go into mobilizations or demonstration or protests, it would be okay report to the street. Okay, and it'd be like orderly.

FANSA: But Ed says the situation at the park was anything BUT orderly.

Tape (Ed Patterson): When we first got down there, I don't think too many guys really even knew right off the bat what our assignment was because it was so freakin' crazy.

FANSA: Here's Ralph again.

Tape (Ralph Grasso): They're throwing jaws of piss off roofs at us. Bottles, bricks, you know this this is all the stuff that's happening while we're trying to gain control.

Tape (Ed Patterson): And the shit just started coming out at us. it was almost like them, they seen as the middle we got out of the cars.

Tape (Ralph Grasso): I remember a rock hitting one of the guys next to me, Burnt cars, flattened tires. People just in your face

Tape (Ed Patterson): And it just seemed like it escalated from that point.

Tape (Ralph Grasso): Very clearly, just clear the corners, how we were told, you know, get them off the corners, get them off the corners. And that's what we did. And that's that's what happened.

Tape (Paul DeRienzo's archive): Here come the police are now coming across the street they're coming across the street they have their clubs out. They're attacking the crowd (screams).

Tape (Ed Patterson): I remember when the horses came down. They started saying, "oh here comes the Gestapo" Because you could hear the horses galloping down the street and stuff.

SOUNDS OF HORSES GALLOPING

Tape (Ed Patterson): I'll tell you the truth. It made me feel pretty good when I seen those horses come up behind me. Because it was a hot night a lot of us were getting tired. It was it like after a while I think even guys I worked with we were like, Oh man, I wish this would just like wrap up soon.

Tape (Ralph Grasso): You know, we were taught to move the crowd back you know, forceful way because this is this what the orders were clear, you know, clear the area clear the park. And that's, that's we were told to do.

MUSIC STARTS

Tape (Ed Patterson): And then I noticed some streets where we'd go in people would refuse to move. So you know, you'd push them back a little bit. When I say push them back, I mean, like a tab, whatever, you know, nothing. Again, this was the guys that I was with.

Tape (Ed Patterson): Me myself that night? I was pushing them back. If that's what you meant, like sure I don't think any cop that was done their role enough. I mean, especially when they were refusing to move off the streets and you again, bricks and bottles thrown at you.

Tape (Lina Fansa): With two hands?

FANSA: Ed held out his two hands in front of the steering wheel of his car. That's where we interviewed him.

Tape (Ed Patterson): Either with two hands or if you had your night stick out you gently there was a way you would hold it like this. And just I don't mean I don't mean like this. I mean, just like push back.

FANSA: His fists were clenched as if holding onto the stick to demonstrate how officers are taught to clear the corners.

FANSA: Ed says, he didn't run into physical conflict that night. None of his team members did.

FANSA: But that wasn't the case for Ralph Grasso based on what we read.

MUSIC OUT

CAUGHT ON VIDEO TAPE

LI: Paul DeRenzo wasn't the only one documenting what happened that night.

Tape (Paul DeRienzo's archive): One officer chased after my direction without as I yelled I'm a media I'm a media person I'm a media person he still ran after me in a rage almost.

LI: Other witnesses — with handheld video cameras — were there. Like Clayton Patterson. He is an artist and videographer. He captured three and a half hours of footage that night.

Tape (Clayton Patterson's archive): A news lady, a press lady got hit in the head with a nightstick by a police officer. I'm a witness. I've seen it.

Tape (Clayton Patterson's archive): You are supposed to be trained in crowd control. This has been out of control.

LI: Community leaders, priests, men, and women – stepped in to try to negotiate.

Tape (Clayton Patterson's archive): There's no dialogue. We are blindly fighting each other.

Tape (Clayton Patterson's archive): Do we have a voice, let me ask you officer? Do we have a voice in whether the park is closed or remains open? Do we have a voice in that? I'm not a radical person.

Tape (Clayton Patterson's archive): We are working on a deal to end this right now.

LI: But some of the crowd was hard to pacify that night; they didn't come to negotiate, tensions had already spiraled out of control.

Tape (Clayton Patterson's archive): I know there are people there that want to keep things escalating.

Tape (Clayton Patterson's archive): No bottles!

MUSIC STARTS

FANSA: But the damage was done. Nightsticks were raised high enough for the crowds to see, and blood was spilt. By daybreak it would almost be over. The curfew had ended.

FANSA: The after-action report reads...5:45 AM, the sun began to rise. And the park reopened to the public. 6 am, Task Force personnel were dismissed. Thirty minutes later, all other units were dismissed.

Tape (Ed Patterson): I think I remember sitting down like almost like right inside the gates at a park. And thinking to myself, Oh, shit, this is Tompkins Square Park cuz it seemed like we weren't even in there when we first got down there.

Tape (Ed Patterson): And we were just kind of finally chillin' out a little bit. You know, we're finally like, Alright. Let's Let's go sit down, man. You know, let's go sit down and just talk though. We just threw everybody out of, and I'm not making fun of it. Like I'm not trying to make. We're just exhausted. You know what I mean? We we shot who's I mean, it was a long night.

FANSA: But what came next, would leave a stain on the NYPD.

MUSIC OUT

THE MEDIA STORM

Archive (NEWS 4): Today, both sides argued over whose riot it was. The demonstrators or the police when both sides clashed over the 1:00 a.m. curfew at Tompkins Square Park this weekend.

LI: The next day, The New York Times published an article on its front page. "Park Curfew Protest Erupts Into a Battle And 38 Are Injured"

LI: Half a dozen injured civilians accused the police of violence in the article.

LI: The story describes the neighborhood that night as “a war zone,” and writes, “The violence was the apparent result of a police effort to halt late-night noise and rowdyism in the park.”

FANSA: Captain Gerald McNamara, the commander of the 9th Precinct and of the police detachment at the scene, defended the police.

FANSA: He said, “I hope you saw what the hell was going on because we didn’t start this.” “We did everything in our power not to provoke an incident. They didn’t charge the crowd until the bricks and bottles started flying.”

MUSIC STARTS

LI: But a week later, the narrative leans towards the civilians. In another New York Times article by Howard French, the Columbia Journalism professor we talked to, he and his two colleagues, write:

FANSA: A “Review of nearly four hours of videotapes of the evening, made by a neighborhood resident and not previously seen by reporters or the police, together with accounts from a Times reporter and photographer on the scene and more than a score of witnesses provides new insights into that night. It clearly details cases in which officers wore no badges or hid their badge numbers, clubbed and kicked bystanders for no apparent reason.”

LI: It was Clayton Patterson’s video – Clayton had just bought his camera days before the riot.

LI: All historical sounds of the scene you heard in this episode are from his video.

FANSA: Clayton remembers the riot like it happened yesterday. And how the media first described it as a melee.

Tape (Clayton Patterson): Melee is like a soft word. You know, I don't think if I was going to think of a really harsh word to describe a night of violence, I wouldn't use melee, would you? It's kind of a cute word. You know, riot or police riot is even worse.

LI: The video from that night changed everything.

MUSIC OUT

Archive: (FOX 5 New York): At first city officials were not very sympathetic to cries of police brutality during the Sunday morning riot in Tompkins Square Park but that has changed now that the mayor and police commissioner have seen some home videos of what happened.

Archive: (FOX 5 New York): There is some behavior that was captured on tape that I think the individual officers that are involved are going to have some great difficulty explaining why they were using the amount of force that they were using at that particular time.

FANSA: There were also pictures. Black and white photographs of cops in helmets raising their nightsticks – frozen at the exact moment of the blow. In clear view of the camera's flash.

FANSA: People cringed in pain. Their bodies crunched over the ground. Ed remembers seeing a photo of his colleague in the papers.

Tape (Ed Patterson): It was a it was a clear picture was it was like ridiculous, like, so it was like he posed for it. I've never forget saying something to him about it. Like how the hell did that happen? Like, would you pose for this thing?

LI: Ed wasn't kidding. The visuals were as clear as day. You could easily tell the badge numbers of the cops from the photographs.

Archive: ([FOX 5 New York](#)): More than 50 allegations of police brutality stemming from the Saturday night incident.

Tape (Paul DeRenzo's archive): If this kind of thing is left unanswered it increases the level of acceptable police violence.

Tape (Paul DeRenzo's archive): 500 people marched from Saint Bridget's Church on the Lower East Side on the ninth police precinct three days after the bloody riot at Tompkins Square Park.

Tape (Paul DeRenzo's archive): When a police officer verbally or physically harasses, intimidates, touches manhandles, beats citizens. God damn it your civil rights are at stake.

MUSIC STARTS

LI: It was the first time the NYPD had to deal with publicity like this.

FANSA: And with all the evidence available for the public to see, there was a lot of pressure to hold the police accountable for what happened that night.

FANSA: And so, 9 police officers were identified and disciplined. Six officers would face criminal charges. At least two were suspended. More went through internal NYPD trials.

LI: One of them – was Ralph Grasso.

LI: And Ralph was in trouble.

THE TRIAL

FANSA: Ralph Grasso went back to work after the riot like normal. As an officer, his golden rule is to never mix work with his home life.

FANSA: But several months after the riot, that would be pretty much impossible.

MUSIC OUT

Tape (Lina Fansa): Where were you the first time you read your name in the newspaper?

Tape (Ralph Grasso): I was home. I was actually at my kitchen table and my name was actually mentioned on the news. Yeah, it had my name, my age and where I lived, didn't have the exact address, but it had, it had where I lived at the time, which was Middle Village.

LI: It was in The Daily News, And the New York Times too. Nov. 8, 1988. Three months after the night of the riot.

LI: "Officer Ralph Grasso, 23, of the Manhattan North Task Force and assigned to the 34th Precinct in Washington Heights."

LI: "Officer Grasso faces charges of "wrongfully" jabbing a man, Timothy Hazel, in the back with a nightstick and then hitting him about the legs with it. The complaints also charged that he hit another man, Michael Rosenthal, about the head and legs with his nightstick."

Tape (Lina Fansa): And what went through your head?

Tape (Ralph Grasso): I was mad. I was really mad. And then I was like, wow, like, why would you put my name in the newspaper? I didn't do anything wrong. I'm saying I didn't do anything wrong.

Tape (Lina Fansa): And did anyone in your family see it?

Tape (Ralph Grasso): Yeah, My wife, my in-laws, my parents.

Tape (Lina Fansa): What did they say?

Tape (Ralph Grasso): They were shocked.

Tape (Yuchen Li): What did you tell your family? Like after your name appeared in the newspaper, when they asked you, hey, what happened?

Tape (Ralph Grasso): I mean, they knew I was down there. So they, you know, I was like, listen, I don't know what those charges are.

FANSA: Ralph was being charged by the police department's civilian complaint review board. It's called CCRB. Basically, it's a group outside the police department responsible for investigating civilian complaints against the police.

FANSA: The board then decides whether or not to bring charges. And if they do, a trial is held in an administrative courtroom, here is where the police commissioner has a final say in the punishment, not the judge. And the worst thing that can happen is a police officer loses his job.

LI: And so, in this case, the CCRB decided to charge Ralph.

Tape (Lina Fansa): What happened after?

Tape (Ralph Grasso): I got the charges after that. And then I... I got a lawyer from the PBA at the time...

LI: The PBA is Patrolmen's Benevolent Association. It's the police union, and it provides counsel to officers who are charged by the CCRB.

Tape (Ralph Grasso): They actually showed up at my command, my charges showing up at my command. It was my lieutenant and my sergeant who actually presented them to me.

MUSIC STARTS

LI: The CCRB report shows the date of Ralph's trial was Dec. 28, 1988.

Tape (Ralph Grasso): The Advocates Office was there from the police department. They had their, their side.

LI: The CCRB presented the civilian complaints against Ralph. They came from two men: Michael Rosenthal and Timothy Hazel.

FANSA: "The officer was charged with hitting the complaints with a nightstick and for calling them a homophobic slur."

FANSA: And then Ralph had an opportunity to defend himself.

Tape (Ralph Grasso): It was so like a court trial. Like, like being in a court. I was. I was basically on the witness stand, pleading my side.

Tape (Ralph Grasso): And my partner at the time testified on my behalf, saying that, Police Officer Grasso didn't do any of that stuff.

Tape (Yuchen Li): It was you and your partner? Your partner as the witness?

Tape (Ralph Grasso): Right.

Tape (Ralph Grasso): Basically, how I cleared the block.. how I cleared the corner... What time I got there... Two standard questions, just like in any trial. And you know, what I observed, what happened while I was there, and that was it. It was literally 15 minutes. 20 minutes. It wasn't long at all.

FANSA: Ralph denies he ever hit or beat anyone.

Tape (Lina Fansa): Even though it says differently...

Tape (Ralph Grasso): There was no assault or anything.

MUSIC OUT

THE AFTER ACTION REPORT

LI: 121 complaints were filed against police after the night of the riot.

LI: We tried to get the details of the complaint against Ralph from the night of the riot. We filed a request with the NYPD under the Freedom of Information Law. But after waiting months, all that came back were 11 complaints. None of them against Ralph Grasso.

FANSA: Ralph told us he was found guilty – but not of assault.

FANSA: He says he was found guilty of not letting an individual go back home to their property, but still that never appeared on any documents. According to Ralph, he was suspended for two weeks. And then he went back on patrol.

FANSA: We also tried to track down Micheal Rosenthal and Timothy Hazel, the two men who made the complaints.

LI: We managed to narrow down 13 contact details and addresses for Timothy Hazel located in this country. After calling them all, we realized they were all disconnected.

FANSA: There were 440 officers at Tompkins Square Park the night of the riot. According to the CCRB report, Not a single one came forward – Quote – “To volunteer evidence which would support or refute any allegations of misconduct.”

FANSA: In the end, it was the video that incriminated the cops.

MUSIC STARTS

Tape (Clayton Patterson’s archive): The world is watching!

Tape (Clayton Patterson’s archive): Somebody call an ambulance!

Archive (CBS Miami): Tonight, new video shows the initial arrest that led to George Floyd's death.

MUSIC OUT

NO REGRETS

FANSA: When I first met Ralph Grasso in March. We sat at a park in Queens, below a large statue of an angel.

FANSA: Engraved into the granite below are words from the Bible.

Tape (Ralph Grasso): Greater love hath no man who a man lay down his life for a friend. And this is in Luke. It's a Bible verse from Luke.

FANSA: As we sat facing the water – our backs to the inscription, Ralph says, it's funny we ended up here. It reminds him of being a cop. It's the same bible verse he's heard at police funerals.

Tape (Ralph Grasso): And I still go to them today.

MUSIC STARTS

Li: Ralph Grasso worked in law enforcement for 36 years.

Li: As he looks back on his career, he has no regrets.

Tape (Ralph Grasso): I mean I was blessed. Yeah. Even in situations of stuff that I went through, made me a stronger person. Again, I've seen everything there is to see. I have.

Tape (Ralph Grasso): I would do it all over again. I feel like I was put for that job to do what I was to do, and that's why I called it a calling.

Tape (Ralph Grasso): And I tried to do the best I could every day.

MUSIC OUT

MUSIC STARTS (SHOE LEATHER THEME MUSIC)

FANSA: This episode was reported, written and produced by me, Lina Fansa

LI: And me, Yuchen Li.

LI: Joanne Faryon is our executive producer and professor. Rachel Quester and Peter Leonard are our co-professors. Special thanks to Columbia Digital Libraries, Professor Dale Maharidge, Ron Kuby, Clayton Patterson and Paul DeRienzo.

FANSA: Shoe Leather's theme music – 'Squeegees' – is by Ben Lewis, Doron Zounes and Camille Miller, remixed by Peter Leonard.

FANSA: Other Music by Blue dot sessions.

FANSA: Our Season four graphic was created by Ghiya Haidar