

Reign of Terror in Raleigh

For years, people were wrongfully arrested on drug charges. Now, they're demanding answers

By SEAN CAMPBELL

THE AFTERNOON of May 21, 2020, Yolanda Irving was relaxing in her bedroom in East Raleigh, North Carolina. The city was in the throes of the Covid-19 pandemic, so her three kids milled around the apartment. Irving's teenage daughter, Cydneea, was in her room across the hall, and her 20-year-old son, Juwan, was in his wheelchair playing video games. Outside, Irving's youngest, Jalen, then 12, sat on the stoop with three teenage neighbors.

Suddenly, more than a dozen officers from the Raleigh Police Department's Vice and Selective Enforcement Unit (SEU, the department's version of SWAT) ran at the boys with riot shields and assault rifles, according to interviews and multiple lawsuits against the city of Raleigh. Thinking they were about to be shot, the boys ran inside for safety. Jalen darted into his mother's apartment with his 16-year-old neighbor Ziyel. Jalen screamed, "SWAT! SWAT! Please don't shoot! Please don't shoot!"

As a few officers burst through Irving's door, other agents pursued the two other boys, 15-year-old Ziquis and 18-year-old Dyamond, into the apartment of neighbor Kenya Walton. There, they held Ziquis, Walton's pregnant 20-year-old daughter, and her autistic 15-year-old son at rifle point. They did the same thing in Irving's apartment, even screaming at the wheelchair-bound Juwan to get on the floor.

"I kept trying to tell them that my son is handicapped, please don't shoot," Irving says. The officers didn't relent until Juwan pulled up his pants to reveal

the brace on his leg, showing them that it was impossible for him to comply. Down the hall, Irving's daughter pleaded with the officers not to shoot their dog.

Walton, who was out picking up groceries for dinner, got a call from a friend that her apartment was under siege. When she arrived back home, an officer approached her with his gun drawn. He escorted her through the back door of her home.

Confused, Walton asked her kids, "What did y'all do?" She turned to the officers and repeatedly asked, "What did they do?"

The officers searched the apartments for an hour and a half for heroin. They found nothing. Kenya Walton and Yolanda Irving are drivers for special-needs children. They aren't heroin dealers. They've never even seen the drug.

Afterward, Omar Abdullah, the lead detective on the raid, briefly spoke with Irving and handed her the search warrant for her home. When Irving saw the photo for the residence attached to Abdullah's warrant, she knew immediately: He had the wrong address. And Abdullah didn't have a warrant at all for Walton's home.

As Irving screamed curses at Abdullah for tearing up the wrong home, he simply turned and walked away. The RPD didn't help her or Walton clean up, and the women say they have yet to receive an apology for the invasion.

The Vice and SEU raid was in fact meant for a man named Marcus Vanirvin, who lived a few hundred feet away in Irving's apartment complex. As their homes were searched, the women saw police arrest him for heroin trafficking when he took out the trash. Then the cops searched his home but found no drugs. The Vanirvin arrest was supposedly based on controlled buys – undercover operations in which a confidential informant is sent to purchase heroin to form the

basis for drug arrests – over the two prior months, incident reports show. Vanirvin denied ever selling – or even using – heroin, and after spending more than two weeks in jail, the charges were dropped.

OMAR ABDULLAH was once considered RPD's finest. He joined the department in 2009 and was named RPD Employee of the Year for 2012. In 2017, Abdullah was in his early forties when he was promoted to detective in one of the department's Drug and Vice units. Once a detective, lawsuits allege, he terrorized the Black community in Raleigh through a series of narcotics arrests built on lies and fabricated evidence, with the help of an equally unreliable confidential informant. Nearly two dozen people are known to have been swept up in these arrests. All of his alleged victims were Black.

At least six men have had their convictions vacated after pleading guilty to drug charges in cases brought by Abdullah, and three federal civil rights lawsuits – including one stemming from the Irving and Walton raids – have been filed related to his police work.

Attorneys for one of Abdullah's alleged victims estimate in a lawsuit that from Aug. 16, 2018, through May 21, 2020 – when Abdullah was suspended following the raid on the Irving and Walton homes – the officer and an informant "conspired to make at least 29 separate controlled buys, most if not all of which involved fake drugs or real narcotics that were planted on the alleged sellers." The attorneys say that about half of these controlled buys resulted in cases that were dismissed because fake heroin was planted on people. In the case of the Irving raid, the "heroin" that was used to secure the warrant was likely brown sugar.

"It's not just Abdullah who's doing this, but there is evidence that a number of other officers either did

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NIGHTMARE IN THEIR OWN HOMES

Kenya Walton (left) and Yolanda Irving stand in front of the doors of their former apartments, where Raleigh cops raided their homes while executing a search warrant at the wrong address.

it or knew it was being done and did nothing about it," says prominent North Carolina civil rights attorney Bradley Bannon, who is not involved in the Raleigh lawsuits. "When there's no consequence for something, the only thing you're left with is just individual personal moral codes or consciences, and that's never been relied upon by any society I'm aware of to regulate conduct."

Specialized police units focused on narcotics and violent crime have been a fixture of modern policing since at least the 1980s, and have been notorious for violating people's constitutional rights. In Atlanta, the Red Dog Unit (an acronym for Run Every Drug Dealer Out of Georgia), formed around 1988, was known for violence – including the killing of a 92-year-old woman during a botched drug raid in 2006 – before it was retired in 2011 and later rebranded as Titan. In Baltimore, the notorious Gun Trace Task Force ran the streets until a series of indictments ranging from robbery to drug dealing brought down the unit in 2017, and pulled the Baltimore Police Department into a federally mandated overhaul due to its civil rights abuses. (This miscon-

duct is the subject of two books as well as an HBO limited series from David Simon.) Last fall, an internal probe of a "crime suppression team" in the Washington, D.C., police force led to prosecutors dropping charges in 65 gun cases. And in January this year, five police officers in Memphis' Scorpion Unit were charged with murder for beating Tyre Nichols, a 29-year-old Black man, to death after a traffic stop. The furor over Nichols' death prompted the Justice Department to launch an investigation into specialized units nationwide in March.

In Raleigh, lawsuits claim that multiple residences have been breached on faulty or fabricated evidence with no-knock or quick-knock warrants obtained in search of narcotics and executed with the aid of the SEU's paramilitary officers – the same kinds of raids that led to the deaths of Amir Locke in Minneapolis last year and Breonna Taylor in Louisville in 2020. And since 2013, at least 12 people have been killed by RPD officers, all but one of them a person of color. In mid-January, a Black man was tased to death by Raleigh cops in a parking lot after police initiated a search because they thought he might have drugs.

(The six officers were placed on administrative leave. Investigations by the police department and North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation are ongoing.)

ASIDE FROM Abdullah, the other constant in each of the dismissed cases is his confidential informant, Dennis Williams, who was unhoused in 2018 and desperate for cash.

That summer, Williams was arrested by Abdullah and another RPD officer for passing off aspirin as cocaine to a confidential informant. Despite having a lengthy and violent criminal history, Williams, then 24, was recruited to be an informant himself and paid for his services. The officers nicknamed Williams "Aspirin" and set him to work scouring the city for heroin peddlers virtually unchecked, according to lawsuits.

On Feb. 28, 2020, Gregory Washington drove with his brother to pick up his friend Diontre Greene and take him to work. Greene asked to pick up Williams on the way. They met Williams outside a Food Lion supermarket in East Raleigh, and he got into the back seat. Within moments, Washington says, Williams

opened his door and frantically dashed across an open field near the parking lot. Washington threw his car in reverse to get away from whatever bad thing he assumed was coming his way, then heard gunfire and felt bullets hitting his car. "I'm looking at the people in my car, and they looking at me, and we all feel like we're about to die," Washington recalls.

When Washington looked up, he says, he saw three police officers pointing their guns at him. Another officer pulled Greene from the back seat by his dreadlocks and threw him to the ground. Washington got out and saw the parking lot filled with unmarked police cars. "It's looking like a movie scene," he says. The officers cuffed Washington, sat him on the curb, and then tore the speakers out of his car. "I'm looking at my brother like, 'What's going on?'"

Things clicked into place for Washington: The van driver who stared him down when he picked up Greene, the feeling that they were being followed, picking up Williams in a grocery parking lot – Williams had set them up.

Washington was taken to a satellite RPD facility in Northeast Raleigh where, he says, he was strip-searched and interrogated. There, he met Abdullah. The officer's eyes were piercing and shaky. "He kind of looked like a drug addict," Washington says. "I'm just looking like, 'What's wrong with this dude?'" Washington was charged in Wake County court with trafficking heroin and conspiracy to traffic heroin, and he spent six days in jail before posting bond with the help of friends and family. But the charges remained.

As Washington's case made its way through the court system, Greene's case was on a different and far more consequential track. He was a convicted felon, and the officers had found a gun on him, which exacerbated his trafficking charge. His case was given to then-Wake County assistant public defender Jackie Willingham. She asked Greene if he was selling heroin – there were plea deals available for people who cooperate with law enforcement. He told her he was innocent.

Willingham was given two more Abdullah cases based on evidence provided by Williams. Both clients maintained their innocence and said they didn't know where the heroin found on them had come from. Willingham notified an assistant district attorney with the Wake County DA's office that something seemed off about her three cases – they were Black men arrested by Abdullah, and their stories were oddly similar.

Willingham also looked up other Abdullah cases and called the defense attorneys assigned to them. They said their clients had all told them the same story: They didn't touch heroin. Willingham emailed a Wake County ADA about the irregularities. The ADA emailed her back,

insisting that her clients were all part of the same "Blood set," meaning they were in the same gang. Not satisfied, Willingham asked a private investigator in the public defender's office, who is a former RPD Vice member, to look into her clients. The PI pulled reports, cross-referenced databases, and made some calls. He couldn't identify any current gang affiliation with the men.

On June 5, 2020, the lab results on the substance found in Greene's case, which Abdullah had claimed was heroin, came back negative for drugs. A couple of weeks later, Willingham got an email from an ADA who questioned the videos submitted as evidence for the drug purchases. By June 30, the DA's office was dismissing Willingham's Abdullah cases and a dozen others, often because the informant – Williams – was deemed unreliable.

Though her cases were over, Willingham wanted to warn other defense attorneys to be on the lookout for cases with Abdullah's name attached, and she wanted a notice appended to his file. So that July, she wrote a letter to the RPD and Wake County DA's office saying she was bothered by what she had uncovered, and that "there are more cases that need to be investigated."

That September, Abdullah was placed on administrative leave. The North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation also launched an independent review of his cases a month later.

As investigations brewed behind the scenes, the men who'd allegedly been framed began to coalesce and look for accountability.

Shortly after the cases were dismissed in the summer of 2020, Washington reached out to a friend of his named Blake Banks, who had also been arrested by Abdullah, to see if he might be interested in filing a lawsuit.

Banks, who'd gone to high school with Williams, had been in and out of jail and prison, mostly for crimes related to selling weed. The men ran into each other once while incarcerated, but otherwise hadn't been in touch. After Banks was paroled on a gun charge in November 2018, he worked hard to rebuild his life. He got two jobs after he was released from prison, then moved on to construction, and finally transitioned to freight-truck hauling.

About a year after he was released from prison, Banks says, Williams hit him up on Facebook and asked where he could buy heroin. Banks told Williams he didn't get down with people like that, adding in a polite brushoff that he would see what he could do. But Williams kept texting about drugs, Banks says. One time, Williams said he was at the spot where they agreed to do a buy. "I said, 'Bro, I never said that I had anything for you,'" Banks remembers. Eventually, Banks stopped responding to Williams' messages.

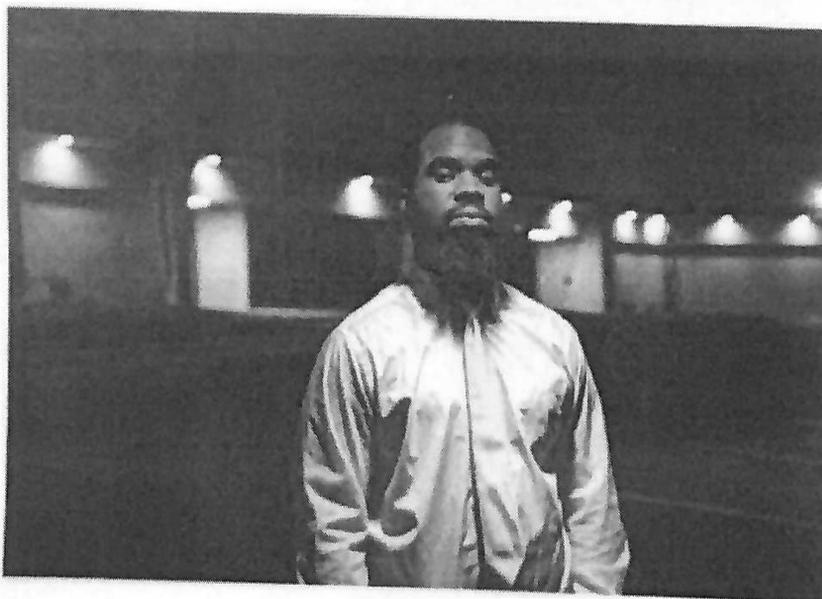
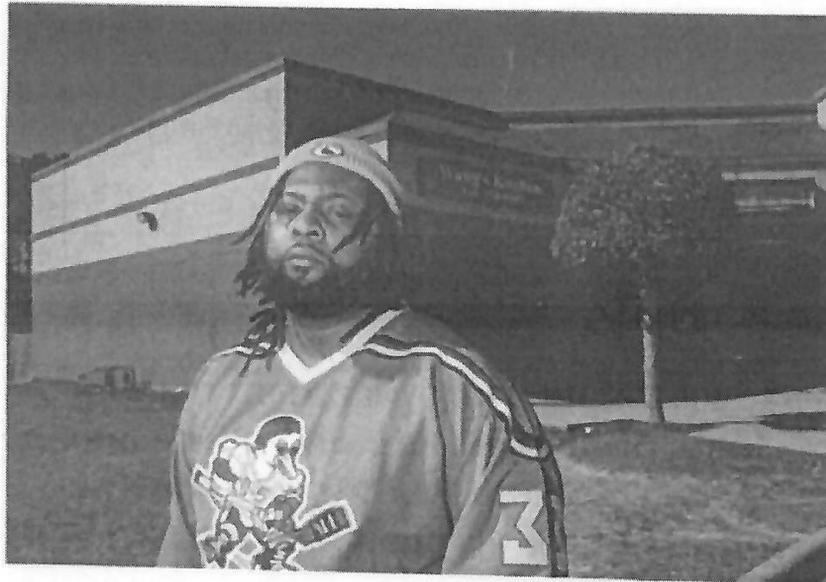
On a late-December morning in 2019, after driving with his godmother to drop off her daughter at work, their car was swarmed by the RPD. Officers pulled Banks from the car, and handcuffed him in front of his family.

"It brought me to tears, man, because I thought my life was over," Banks says. "I thought I was really about to be guilty for something that I don't even know what I did."

According to Abdullah's incident reports, Banks had set up a heroin buy with informant Williams on Nov. 26, 2019. Abdullah wrote that on Dec. 11, 2019, he also watched Banks and another man sell heroin to Williams.

When Abdullah moved in for the arrest that day with other officers, he claimed, Banks sped off in a red Dodge Charger, and the other man simply ran away.

"When there's no consequence for something, you're left with individual personal moral codes or consciences, and that's never been relied upon by any society I'm aware of to regulate conduct."



TELLING THEIR STORY

Gregory Washington (top) and Blake Banks stand where they were wrongly arrested by the Raleigh Police Department. Banks says, "It brought me to tears, man, because I thought my life was over."



RECOVERING FROM THE RAID

Amir Abboud was with his then-pregnant wife and young son in their suburban Raleigh home when their door was knocked down during the execution of a search warrant intended for another person.

But Banks didn't arrange a drug buy on Dec. 11; his receipts show he was out of the state on a truck delivery. And as for the supposed sale that occurred in November, lab tests came back negative for drugs.

Banks was able to post bond with the help of family, but his relationships with them were strained. His mom thought he was back to selling; his girlfriend broke up with him. And social media was hell — his mug shot was everywhere.

For Washington's part, with the bond and legal fees resulting from his case, he owed more than \$22,000 in court debt. Over the next year, he worked up to 12 hours a day between construction and driving for Lyft to dig himself out of debt.

He still suffers from intense anxiety from that day his car was shot in the supermarket parking lot with what he later learned were rubber bullets. And he's never sure what might set him off.

"I could be parked somewhere and it could be dark outside and I'll think about it," he says. "I remember the shots, how I felt at that moment.

"Bro, I don't know if you ever felt like you was about to die. That's a feeling you'll never forget."

ONCE WILLINGHAM'S Abdullah cases were dismissed, she referred those clients to Abraham Rubert-Schewel, a civil rights attorney in Durham who got his start clerking for Jack Weinstein, then the last living member of Thurgood Marshall's legal team that prepared *Brown v. Board of Education*.

After he gathered five plaintiffs who said they were framed by Abdullah, Rubert-Schewel reviewed the state's investigation into the detective.

"It was all these people who had had large parts of their lives taken away by blatant, clear misconduct, and it was kept away in this secret file where no one could really know about it," Rubert-Schewel says.

Through depositions and discovery, he says he confirmed that at least six other officers knew that Abdullah's arrests were bogus — but didn't stop him. Abdullah's supervising sergeant, William Rolfe, provided little oversight, according to the federal civil rights lawsuits. In his deposition, Rolfe said he routinely broke with written RPD oversight policies for supervisors because that was the norm. "It was just status quo," he said in a deposition. "[T]here was no-

body around saying, 'This is OK, that's OK.' You just do it. You've learned to do from your predecessors."

Four other officers told Abdullah that the heroin Williams turned in looked like brown sugar. And the lawsuits and depositions indicate they allowed arrests to occur after field tests came back negative. In a text thread among the officers, they joked about taking "'bets' on whether Aspirin would again produce 'fake heroin,'" according to a recent court filing. One of the officers did report Abdullah's pattern of false arrests to Rolfe and a supervising lieutenant. He stated in his deposition that he believed no action was taken because Abdullah is Muslim and Black, and the supervisors were afraid of being called out for discrimination. (The officers named in the lawsuits deny the allegations against them.)

Based on all the facts he had gathered, Rubert-Schewel filed a suit on April 26, 2021, on behalf of 12 people who were swept up in Abdullah's cases, including Washington and Banks. And five months later, the city reached a \$2 million settlement with the plaintiffs. Williams was indicted by the Wake County DA on five counts of obstruction of justice.