

November 2, 2022

Dear Mayor Michael Hancock, Police Chief Ron Thomas, District Attorney Beth McCann, Governor Jared Polis, Attorney General Phil Weiser, US Attorney Cole Finegan, Senator Michael Bennet, Senator John Hickenlooper, Rep. Diana Degette, Denver City Council Members, Speaker Alec Garnett, State Sen. Chris Hansen, Rep. Leslie Herod

I am writing to invite you, as my guest, to a screening of *THE HOLLY*, at the Denver Film Festival next Thursday, November 10, at the Ellie Caulkins Opera House. I directed this film, and wrote a book, published last year, *The Holly: Five Bullets, One Gun and the Struggle to Save an American Neighborhood*. The book and film take an in-depth look at a historic northeast Denver neighborhood through the lens of a prominent gang shooting case involving an activist.

You are in receipt of this letter because I believe the findings of my eight-year investigation are of vital interest to your work. With youth and street violence rising, heated debates over police reform, and activists across the country claiming that they are being targeted because of their community advocacy, I hope to get your views on some of the troubling things I found.

Among them:

- The corruption of Denver's federally funded anti-gang effort;
- The misconduct of confidential informants;
- Links between City Hall and active gang members;
- Efforts to mislead the public and the Department of Justice; and
- The targeted takedown of a well-known activist by gang members, some of whom had ties to the police.

I want to be clear that I am not myself an activist, nor do I have any aspiration to office nor an allegiance to anything but the truth. I am a longform journalist, with work published in the *New York Times*, *The New Yorker* and other publications. I also grew up in Denver, and after returning home in 2014 to work on this book and documentary, I am now a full-time resident of the city.

I began to report on this neighborhood because I thought it would help explain the seemingly inexplicable: Why would a prominent anti-gang activist—who had been credited by law enforcement with helping to stop youth violence—shoot a young gang member at his own peace rally?

That was what happened on September 20, 2013, in Holly Square. That day, Terrance Roberts, a third-generation resident of the community, was set to move into a Boys & Girls Club he had advocated for being built. Roberts, a former gang member himself, led an organization that worked with at-risk youth. He had drawn praise from the community and from legislators and law enforcement, and was working with critical federal dollars to reduce gang violence.

But instead of unpacking boxes in his new office that night, Roberts spent the night in jail, facing attempted murder charges and the likelihood of a conviction and long prison sentence. But Roberts said he fired in self-defense. No one in law enforcement, nor city or state government, nor in the media, appeared to believe him. And though it was evident to experts and others whom the Denver police relied on that the shooting incident was gang-related, the case was neither characterized nor investigated as such.

What happened? The answer to that question is not simple. But, over the eight years I reported, wrote and brought this story to film, I saw that it held a key to understanding how power functions in Denver. Specifically, I learned:

- How and why false narratives continue to be perpetuated about people and critical events in our most vulnerable neighborhoods;
- How public funds are being spent to fight crime in these neighborhoods
- How confidential informants are used to disrupt communities with impunity
- That the beneficiaries of gentrification also benefit from street violence

When I look at what is happening with funding and law enforcement efforts to stop gang and youth violence—and the way success is defined—I can't help but think about Dwight Eisenhower's warning of a "military industrial complex." In my book, I talk about the notion that we are facing an "urban war industrial complex." I also see the same strategies used to undermine Black and brown communities in the civil rights era being employed today, which was why I made sure my book told a multigenerational story.

I don't know what you may have heard about this project. I mention so because an ocean of falsehoods has been spread about it—by people who call themselves activists, by people paid by the city, and even by at least one elected official. Recently, I was sued by two gang members who were paid by the City of Denver to be "anti-gang" workers in the highly problematic federally funded effort that I documented and which you will see in the book and film. This lawsuit demands public scrutiny because it brought further evidence to light that the City of Denver misled the public. In part because of that evidence, the plaintiffs voluntarily dropped their lawsuit.

As a journalist, it pains me to say that attacks on my work have been made easier because many of Denver's biggest news outlets perpetuated the City of Denver's systematic misrepresentations. I came to think of *THE HOLLY* as an alternate history of a neighborhood and a heavily covered gang shooting case. I hope this makes your independent review of my findings ever more important. I ask you to step outside the echo chamber created by powerful interests, which neither serves democracy nor bends toward justice.

This is not a story from the past. As those of you who have read the book know, it ends in 2021. The film does as well. Both have won national acclaim and awards. According to the *Christian Science Monitor*, "If you want to understand the origins of the violence ravaging many urban areas... read *The Holly*."

I faced every ethical challenge imaginable in this project. I have nothing to do with Terrance Roberts's campaign for mayor. I did my best to be an impartial seeker of the truth, which became tougher and more dangerous as I went, precisely because of what my findings expose about threats to our city and to our democratic ideals. Indeed, many people risked their lives to make sure this story got told.

According to the *Denver Gazette*, THE HOLLY is "a documentary the most powerful people in Denver don't want to see, and don't want you to see."

Would you be willing to see it? Tickets are available for Thursday, November 10, 8 pm, at the Ellie Caulkins Opera House. Please let me know if I can reserve your seat or if you would like to attend.

I appreciate your consideration and hope for a chance to get your perspective on the findings of this project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Julian Rubinstein". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

-Julian Rubinstein
www.thehollyfilm.com
www.thehollybook.com