

BUILDING JUSTICE PODCAST



CRISJ Building Justice Podcast

Season 3, Episode 2: Helping Sacramento Reimagine Public Safety.

Moderator: Dr. Corrine McIntosh Sako, licensed psychologist

Guests: Matthew Solomon, Filmmaker

Please note: This transcript may be imperfect. Please contact Dr. Sako directly should you have questions.

Music lyrics:

Company under construction, the function, justice for the human family we demand it. Justice, true freedom, equality is a must. Thus, decolonization of the planet. So bust this. People be the power now we're Building Justice. Pulling out divinations, now we're Building Justice. Welcome the planet to the Podcast, "Building Justice," "Building Justice," "Building Justice." Building is to add on, or to do away with.

0:33

Corrine: Welcome to Building Justice, a podcast by Sacramento State Center on Race, Immigration and Social Justice. We explore critical issues affecting our communities with the hopes of creating a healthier and more just world. In the last episode of Season two of Building Justice, we featured an episode around campus policing where we discussed alternatives to policing. And today's podcast widens that scope, where we discuss reimagining public safety.

[0:59] I'm Dr. Corinne Macintosh Sako, a Sac State alumna, licensed psychologist and president of the Sacramento Valley Psychological Association. And I'm here with filmmaker Matthew Solomon. Matthew was born and raised in Los Angeles and has been in the entertainment business for most of his adult life, first in music and then as an award winning writer and director. His passion for people, equity and social justice led him to work as a consultant for organizations needing help with conflict resolution and partnership building.

During the pandemic, he returned to school to obtain a master's degree in public administration so that he could have more of an impact in helping to create communities that work for everyone. His course of study involved a deep dive into understanding policing, the carceral system and public safety. His film, "Reimagining Safety," is a documentary that looks at how policing and incarceration create more harm than good, why the system persists, and what changes can be made to make everyone safe. Today, we'll be talking with Matthew about his documentary and our upcoming community impact screening of the documentary held on the Sacramento State University campus on Friday, September 22nd, to help Sacramento re-imagine public safety. Thanks for joining me today, Matthew, and thank you for creating this powerful film.

2:30

Matthew: Oh, thank you. It's my pleasure to be here. And I'm looking forward to having this conversation and to the screening we have coming up.

Corrine: Yeah. How did Reimagining safety come to be?

2:42 Matthew: Oh, well. Well, it's kind of a I mean, it's. It's really like an intersection of all my life experiences, So I'll try and keep it short because I just turned 50 and it's a lot of a lot of ground to cover. But basically, like you said, I you know, I grew up in L.A., born and raised. I had what I later found was a very unique experience where I went to very integrated schools. And so my friends were every race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation. And so as a cis, hetero, white male, I, I observed at an early age that I had different experiences than my friends, you know, my black friends in particular. And so that kind of stayed with me through school. And in the early nineties, when I graduated high school, I went to the University of Southern California School of Music. And so I was a music student there. And while I was there I was taking sociology and anthropology courses because I was I was really fascinated. Well, I had to take them, but I became really fascinated with societies, you know? On why people believe what people do. Why, Why cities and governments and and communities are set up the way they are and why we have the problems that we do. And we were literally learning about systemic racism at the same time as the Rodney King beating and then the L.A. riots and then the OJ Simpson trial. And so all of these, you know, big cultural events were happening at the same time. And so, you know, that stuck with me. And I wanted to music, as you were saying, and I was a professional musician and I got into filmmaking

4:34 And then in I forget the exact year, I think it was 2014 when Trayvon Martin was murdered. You know, it was like so reminiscent of Rodney King, because here was this horrible murder that was caught on, you know, an audio recording. And his the murderer, George Zimmerman, got off, you know, and then the Black Lives Matter movement started. And then there was Michael Brown and, you know, all these other people who were being murdered by the police caught on camera. And, you know, for me, it was like, wow, we're still doing this. And in my mind, because I was also doing I was always interested in personal development. So I was always in seminars and taking courses and interested in communication and relationships and how to be a better person and a partner and citizen of the world. And, you know, it occurred to me that, you know, in my training we all have our own unique lived experiences and our own

points of view of how we see people in the world based on those experiences. And so I believed that the more that people understood that. You know, generally speaking, the black experience in relation to police was very different than mine as a white male and that there was a relationship between police violence and people seeing being socialized to see black people as more criminal or more violent or more whatever. That, if people understood this that we would all be on board for change.

6:08 And the frustrating thing was when we got to 2020 with COVID first and then the murder of George Floyd, that that wasn't the case. However, people after seeing the murder of George Floyd, you know, there was a big worldwide, you know, support for making changes to those systems and calling out the violence and the anti-Blackness, not just in the United States, but all over the world. And so it was another moment of me thinking, wow, we're still doing this. And and at that point, I chose to go back to school, and I figured I was done with the entertainment business. I had been making films while doing personal conflict, while doing conflict resolution. And I was like, you know what? I need to, you know, at this point in my life use my privilege and my access to help support change.

7:04 And so I thought I would get into government or politics or policy or something. And as I was going through my master's program in public administration, I was applying all all of that coursework around sustainability and communities and transformative leadership and things like that to the issues with policing, incarceration. And so what I was finding on the academic side was there were academic resources for like showing how policing and incarceration cause harm, especially to underserved communities and black and brown communities and unhoused communities. You know, there were there was a lot of research on that, but not a lot on what the alternatives could be.

7:50 And so I started looking, well, what are the alternatives? And a classmate directed me to Mariame Kaba. *We do this till we free us*. And I'd already read Angela Davis's *Are prisons obsolete?* And so I was finding this, you know, alternatives that were humane and equitable and made made a lot of sense. And and when it came time to do my final thesis, I thought I was going to write a paper. But but one of my academic advisors was like, we know you can write a paper, but we also know that you make movies and you're creative. Why don't you do a film? Why don't you do a documentary? And I'm like, That's a lot of work. And she was like, Well, that's okay, you know? And, and she was like, Look, it could be ten or 15 minutes. It doesn't have to be like a long thing. And I was like, I can't cover this in 10 to 15 minutes. And literally, she was like, Well, go ahead and do it anyway. And so luckily I did. And I started finding people to interview and I started putting it together and it became, you know, *Reimagining Safety*. And that's kind of how all of this came about.

Corrine: You feature news footage from some of the biggest turning point moments that we've seen in quite some time, including the murder of George Floyd in 2020, which, as you said, reignited and reinvigorated conversations around police reform and abolition in the United States. And you weave this footage around interviews with a lot of incredible voices, such as U.S. law professor Dr. Jodie Armor, sociologist Nikki Black, Brooklyn College professor Alex Vitale, Dr. Elle Jones and Los Angeles District Attorney George Gascon. Why was it important to you to create this film and highlight these conversations?

Matthew: Well, I think, you know, going into it, because this was an academic, it started as an academic project. It was it was very important to have cited all reputable sources. And I wanted to like, I could have just done a film with activists, but then people would say, Oh, it's just a bunch of activists. But but I knew that if I could back it up with academics like Alex Vitale, you know, who's been involved with worked with law enforcement for 30 something years, He wrote a book called *The End of Policing*. And I had been citing like he wrote a paper. I forget the title of it, but it dealt with the criminalizing of homelessness in Los Angeles, Safe Cities Initiative, I believe it was called. But anyway, I had been citing his papers, and so I had reached out to him and he said yes. And then he connected me with Dr. Jody Armor at USC and Dr. Armor connected me with George Gascon, who's the L.A. County District attorney. And so like that, that was that cycle was kind of complete. I knew I wanted I did want activist voices, but I also wanted a prosecutor or prosecutors because they have a very influential role in what happens to somebody who is alleged to have committed a crime and/or, you know, committed. You know, I'm drawing a blank. You know, found guilty of committing a crime. So they're very influential in that role. Nikki Black We're in a couple of different communities together around anti-racism and in art and culture. Like she's an award winning slam poet in addition to being a sociologist and just like this really amazing person. So, you know, I knew I wanted her in the film and she said, yes, I wanted to somebody to speak to the law enforcement perspective. And George Gascon, in addition to being the district attorney of Los Angeles, was a police officer for 40 years in Los Angeles and Sacramento, I'm sorry, San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Mesa, Arizona. And then Hadiya Kennedy, who was with LAPD for 11 years. I met her through Senate, Deborah Mont. Also known as Mr. Check Point, who I had interviewed. And he is somebody who follows the police and films them regularly. And then Jose Gutierrez, I wanted somebody to talk about to speak to mental health and the impact of that and what we could do from a mental health perspective. And so I was connected to Jose Gutierrez, who grew up in L.A. County. And, you know, he's in San Pedro right now and like, awesome guy. And then and then El Jones is a professor in Halifax, Nova Scotia, who I was, you know, introduced to through actually somebody who has a podcast in Toronto, Canada, that I had been on his show before, and he was like, Oh, you should talk to Elle Jones. And she's you know, she's worked in prisons since she was 14. Her father was an activist. She's a professor in Halifax, and she co-wrote a 200 page report that was commissioned by Halifax on defunding the police. You know what? What would it mean to do that? How would we do that? What would be the you know, how do you approach that? What would be the benefits? And so she actually had done this research and there was this report where I was like, wow, this exists. And so that's kind of how it all came together.

13:25 Corrine: You've been traveling all across the country showcasing this film and having discussions about its message. How's the film being received and what are those conversations sound like?

13:36 Matthew: Yeah, I mean, overwhelmingly positive. You know, most of the you know, we've either been doing film festival screenings or community impact screenings. Sometimes they're the same. They we're going to be at the Lost River Film Festival in San Marcos, Texas, in October. And that festival, there's a huge activist community. And so in addition to the screening, there's going to be a huge panel afterwards. But basically, you know, I'm connecting with a lot of local organizations who are interested in in the message and bringing people together and having panels that support the specific communities. And so overwhelmingly, it's

been positive. And what you know, what I'm excited about with Sacramento is, you know, the Sacramento Psychological Association, this is the first mental health organization that that's reached out. Like, you know, the other groups have all been social justice, criminal prison reform, criminal justice, you know, that sort of thing. And so this is actually, you know, hosted by like the primary host. You all, you know, it's coming from the mental health perspective. So it's really. You know, I'm really grateful with, you know, my intention of having this film represent a bunch of, you know, several varying perspectives, all leading toward the same thing, like how do we have people be safe and cared for and supported and resourced from all these various perspectives? And then here we are in Sacramento, you know, coming at it, originating from the mental health perspective, which is really awesome.

15:24 Corrine: Yeah. Now, in addition to the many roles that I have, I also am a community mental health advocate. And I don't know about you, but I know when I've been advocating for systems change or confronting those in positions of power to allocate budget funds and create policies that can increase care and decrease incarceration or interactions with police. I've been met with a continuum of energy ranging from detachment, disinterest, disdain and downright hostility. It seems that there's an over identification with these symptoms, that individuals have their identities entwined in these systems and they take great offense to being challenged. And then we see governance out of emotion rather than governance based on data. I see this is one of the reasons why this system of policing and incarceration persists. What else do you see as reasons for the system persisting?

16:25 Matthew: Well, there's a number of things. I mean, you know, the first thing that comes to mind with what you shared is, you know, we're socialized into a context of punishment. You know, we're very and actually X talks about this in in the film. A couple of other people do, too. But but basically you know our our go to for dealing with problems or dealing with people who are having problems or challenges is punishment. You know, we need to lock them up. We need to take something away. We need to, you know, put put people in a corner, you know, whatever it is. It's all it's all punishment is like the first solution that comes to mind for a lot of us. And it's really hard to get away from that. Like if, you know, if if something happens, the trash can gets knocked over or somebody parks, you know, messed up in front of somebody's house. Like the first thing is, oh, want to call the cops or oh, they should be ashamed of themselves or I'm going to, you know, leave a nasty note or whatever, you know, to punish that person. So. So that's one of the things is that our go to as punishment.

You know, the other thing is, is that along with the punishment is there's there's an immense amount of propaganda or as they say, "copaganda" that leads us to believe that the only solution to most of our problems is to have armed police officers show up and harass people, clear people, arrest people, intimidate people, you know, and then lock them up or take them away or something. And so, you know, it's really part of our our culture at this point, our collective culture, that we believe that these are the only ways to deal with people is punishment and, you know, policing and incarceration. And so, you know, what this film does and what a lot of people in the work are doing is showing no like when people are cared for and resourced. Crime goes down because there's no need for it. You know, when when people are met with respect and dignity, the likelihood, you know, coming from a conflict resolution background, like I watch all this stuff and all I see is escalation. You know, police aren't trained. There was this statistic I came across where on the average police departments across the country in their

police academies, spend 60 hours on firearms training. You know, shooting guns and only 8 hours on de-escalation. And that de-escalation usually comes towards the end when they're doing, you know, roleplaying activities and, you know, have scenarios where they show up and they're supposed to talk to people. And so they're not really taught or trained in how to deal with people. You know.

19:36; Corrine And yeah, we we should think about public safety the way we think about public health. But, you know, no one would suggest that hospitals alone can keep a population healthy, that no matter how, no matter how well-run that hospital might be, you know, a healthy community needs neighborhood clinics, health education, parks, environments, free of toxins, government policies that protect the public during health emergencies and so much more that just that health isn't just about hospitals---safety isn't just about police. Here in Sacramento, we have a number of awesome community experts already doing some of this work. We have Decarcerate Sacramento, a group that works to decrease jail populations, prevent jail expansions and shift county funds away from policing and toward community based care. We have the Anti-police Terror Project, a Black led and multiracial coalition that works to eradicate police terror from our communities and Mental Health First as a project of anti police terror project that features mobile peer support, de-escalation assistance and other life affirming interventions to interrupt the need for law enforcement and mental health crisis. First response. Also, state's new president, Dr. Luke Wood, has committed resources to hire seven additional counselors and other individuals trained in social work in the Campus Safety Office. What other kinds of policing alternatives and solutions have you learned of in your work with this film?

21:11 Matthew: Yeah, well, you know, it's interesting. So like every time I go to a different city, I learn more about like, what those communities are doing. In the film, you know, we talk about the CAHOOTS program in Eugene, Oregon, the STAR program in Denver, Colorado. And then there's a there's another program in Houston, Texas. And so all of those cahoots and star in particular are teams of, you know, mental health professionals, social workers that teams that respond to calls that are that are not violent. You know, so you call 911. They divert the call. If it's not like a violent thing that's happening. If it's a, you know, mental health wellness check, something like that, they divert it to, you know, these these teams and then they go out and they deal with the situation and with Cahoots and Star, neither have called for armed police back up and and they're saving their cities millions of dollars. I think it was 8.7 million that Cahoots saves Eugene, Oregon annually by having them show up and not the police.

And so, you know, I know we were there was, a, I think it was the Circle program here in L.A. I haven't seen any data on that yet, but that was something that they were using here in Los Angeles to deal with unhoused, unhoused folks. You know, because we they were doing all of these like sweeps during the during the pandemic where, you know, all these communities, tent communities popped up in like Echo Park and Malibu and all of that and and Venice Beach. And then, you know, one day the sheriffs or LAPD would show up and they would just kick everybody out, which is, you know, you're uprooted.

It's interesting. I, I, I haven't talked about this yet because there's like, really knew a couple of weeks ago, I volunteered at an event in Skid Row in downtown Los Angeles. And, you know, I spent the whole day down there and, you know, the people, they're like, that's their community, you know, just because they're living in tents or, you know, whatever shelters they're in, that's where they live. And so, you know, a lot of politicians talk about, oh, we'll just put them on a bus and drive them out to Santa Clarita, which is, you know, miles away. And, you

know, but but, you know, if you're living in a certain area and you have your your friends, your community, your you know, where your resources are, people know how to find you, to bring you food and things like that. And then all of a sudden you're you're, you know, forced onto a bus and driven out to wherever. And now you got to be in this other area like that. There's a lot of harm that's caused, you know, mentally and emotionally by doing that to people versus.

You know, we have ,we could build housing. I see condos and, you know, expensive apartment buildings popping up all over in areas that ten, 15 years ago nobody wanted to live in. You know, but you could house people and and it would be cheaper to house people and give them resources to, you know, employment, education and health care, mental health services in this talked about in the film like it's it's almost half the price half the cost to do that versus keep it you know incarcerating people which is which is the go to.

24:58 Corrine: So much trauma could be avoided. Yeah. Yeah. If we just really built up and supported these systems of care. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. You and I connected through some of my community organizing work. You reached out to inquire if there might be any interest in hosting a community impact screening here in Sacramento. And it's been incredible to just to see the large outpouring of support from community partners to make this event happen. We'll be holding our community impact screening of Reimagining Safety on Friday, September 22nd at 4 p.m. The event is free and seating is limited, so you must reserve your seat at WW W dot Sacramento Valley psychologist dot com and we'll put a link in the show notes. The event is sponsored by the Sacramento Valley Psychological Association. Public Health Advocates the Sacramento Chapter of the California Faculty Association, Sacramento City Council. Katie Valenzuela and Sacramento State's Department of Political Science. We will screen the film in the Hinde Auditorium located in Sacramento State University Union, and we will have a panel after the screening featuring Matthew and some of those local community experts I referenced earlier. Ryan McClinton from Public Health Advocates First Response Transformation Campaign. Mac from Decacerate, Sacramento. Keon Bliss from Anti-Police Terror Project. And Michael Lee Chang, a SAC State student advocate. Matthew, what are you hoping the Sacramento community takes away from the event?

26:31 Matthew: Well, I mean, with all of this, it's always, you know, my intention is to have there be a space for possibility that there there's something possible other than what we've been doing that would actually have a significant positive impact on the community. And so it's my desire, my intention that that's what happens. And I know that with the panelists that are assembled and the people that are interested and the you know, the people that are hosted, the organizations that are hosting, you know, that that's that's the. You know, all the makings for all of that to take place. So that's that's what I'm hoping for.

27:18 Corrine: Great. Do you have any final words for our listeners?

27:20 Matthew: No, just thank you. You know, I invite everybody to visit our website re-imagining safety movie dot com. And, you know, you can watch the trailer and there's links to the Sacramento screenings as well as our other screenings if you're not in Sacramento. And yeah just you know I encourage people to. You know, think about, like what? What are the things that we accept as true that may not be true or there may be other alternatives. If we really cared about one another, you know, I like to I like to always pose that question. If we really cared about one

another, what would we do? And and to have that be an inquiry, you know, that kind of carries you all forward in your daily lives.

28:13 Corrine: Well, that's great framing. Thank you so much for sharing this documentary and its message with us. It truly does bring a message of hope. Thank you. Thank you for listening. We hope our ongoing conversations spark understandings, empathy and motivation to join the struggle for a better future for all. You just listened to the Building Justice podcast. The information contained in this podcast, including its title and description, represent the views and opinions of the hosts and guests and do not necessarily represent the views or opinions of the Sacramento State University., CRISJ, and/or the Building Justice podcast committee.

Outro Music Lyrics

No more penalties and no more wars. Based on the actions. Now, time for "Building Justice," "Building Justice." Time for building justice, justice.