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On Behalf Of:
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Measure: HB4131

During the summer of 2020, I served as a legal observer at the protests in Portland. As a non-participant, I was there to document police action against protesters.

What I saw was shocking. I watched officers delight in abusing anyone they could get their hands on—often this was the young, the elderly, and the vulnerable. My memory is scarred with images of children choking on tear gas desperately clawing at their eyes. I cannot get rid of the images of those kids getting grabbed from behind by officers, repeatedly body slammed into the ground, and then let go to prevent a record of force that accompanies an arrest. But most of all, I cannot forget the delight in the eyes of the officer who knew that they would never face any accountability for their brutal actions. When they weren't wearing their gas masks, I saw their grins and heard their laughter.

I recall one day, early in the protests, the crowd sat outside the Justice Center in downtown Portland. At this point it was surrounded by a chain-link fence. Thousands had gathered to fight for justice and denounce violence. They sat there, peacefully, and begged the cops to stop their violent tirade. There was no provocation beyond words—and those words were kind in those days. Tear gas started falling from the sky as it was fired from grenade launchers. People desperately tried to kick it away, but it was not effective. These were the early days before everyone wore gas masks. The police had not been threatened, but they decided to display their power: they could hurt us if they wanted and there was nothing we could do.

I remember another day when I was approached by an individual in the crowd. They showed me footage that was shocking—a couple of officers who were away from the protest decided they were going to gas a houseless encampment. There was no protest. There was no threat. They just thought it would be funny. I wish I knew where this footage ended up because nothing embodies the grotesque mindset held by the police of Portland. If you give them a toy of torture, they will use it on anyone who can't fight back.

Gas is a uniquely horrific weapon. It is a chemical weapon that causes extreme pain and unstudied effects on reproductive systems. It is a lasting effect—one feels hungover the next day after exposure. It does not discriminate. It seeps into clothes, homes, businesses, and cribs. It is poison in the air we breathe. It is collective punishment that leads to chaos and destruction.

I became a legal observer because of my experience with tear gas. Portlanders

continued showing up to protests because of tear gas. We came out to say a simple truth—that Black Lives Matter, that Black people have the essential right to exist—and were met with nothing but escalating violence. It was made very clear that the message we were carrying was subversive to the conventional paradigm and the police were there to silence that message. Free people cannot be silenced.

If you look at when the protests died down, it was when the police were forced to deescalate by this legislature. A reversal of this process would be a mistake. It will lead to more violence inflicted on the people of Portland by an out-of-control and violent police force. It will lead to nothing but harm and conflict at a time that the city needs to heal.

Please do not enable this conflict and violence. If anything, please ban the use of tear gas in any situation. Collective punishment is wrong. Torture is wrong. Pain compliance is wrong.