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Good cops must speak out about bad colleagues

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I couldn't stop staring at the mug shot of Najee Rivera that every news outlet seemed to use when on Monday, two Philly police officers were found not guilty of beating him up during a traffic stop in May 2013.

Rivera has since died, killed in a street fight in December 2015. But back then, in that photo, his right eye swelled purple, his forehead was dotted with Band-Aids soaked red.

The cops said he resisted arrest, but surveillance video that Rivera's determined girlfriend found after canvassing the neighborhood showed Officers Sean McKnight and Kevin Robinson mowing Rivera's scooter down with their cruiser, and then throwing him against a wall and the ground as he cried out under fists and batons.

The city paid Rivera \$200,000 to settle a lawsuit stemming from the beating, but none of the evidence seemed to sway a jury in the criminal case.

A week earlier, another jury acquitted Edward Sawicki III of charges he used racial slurs and threatened to kill an African American man during a traffic incident almost three years ago in South Philly.

Sawicki was reportedly present on Monday to congratulate McKnight and Robinson. Yes, you read that right.

Cops getting off, sometimes in the face of what seems like irrefutable evidence against them, shouldn't surprise anyone. The year is 2016. The place, United States of America.

Last year, the Washington Post found that among the thousands of fatal shootings at the hands of police since 2005, only 54 officers had been charged. Most were cleared or acquitted.

An earlier study by the Cato Institute's National Police Misconduct Reporting Project found that just over a third of cops who were convicted of a criminal charge went to jail, and they spent way less time behind bars than civilians.

We don't just protect cops who behave badly in Philly; we give them promotions and parties. In the case of McKnight, Robinson and Sawicki - all of whom Fraternal Order of Police Lodge 5 president John McNesby told me "will get their jobs back" - it's a "justice was served . . . now let them serve you" shindig where the three will be "celebrity" bartenders. The event Sunday night at the FOP lodge will be washed down with a Shot of Southern - a local country band, not the drink.

My colleague at Al Dia, Sabrina Vourvoulias, wrote a great opinion piece about this, where she nailed it in a couple of sentences. "Justice in our city doesn't favor the battered and victimized if their skin color is brown or black. Justice in our city is a card-carrying member of the cult of the cop."

That goes nationally, too. Even as the number of police officers facing charges has risen - driven by the ease of video recording in the iPhone era and a national debate over law enforcement tactics - convictions haven't followed.

A 2015 New York Times article summed it up: "The law gives the police the benefit of the doubt."

"Such legal realities leave a wide gap between an unnecessary police shooting and a criminal one," the article stated. "A gap that, barring a new Supreme Court ruling on police use of force, must be filled by better policies, training, accountability and supervision, experts say."

Is that what it will take? I'm not sure. I find myself too often left shaking my head in disappointment and disgust at police officers getting away with bad behavior, brutality, and sometimes murder. And increasingly I blame those who co-sign the behavior through their own complicit silence.

More and more I'm convinced the answer lies within the ranks, as I saw in another recent case against a SEPTA police officer. In that incident, Officer Douglas Ioven was accused of roughing up and falsely arresting a nurse after a Christmas 2013 argument in a Suburban Station doughnut shop.

In March, a jury found Ioven guilty of misdemeanor counts of false imprisonment and official oppression.

Why was he convicted when so many others skate? Was it because no one died, maybe? Or did it, as I suspect, have something to do with jurors hearing from a fellow officer?

One of the people to take the stand was retired SEPTA Sgt. Nathaniel Bentley. Bentley told the jury he stepped in when he saw his colleague and a woman arguing. He later accompanied her to file complaints against the officer.

On the stand, he testified that Officer Ioven told him, "I think I screwed up because I thought she was a homeless person but she was a regular person."

I have to think that made an impression on the jury. It definitely made one with me.

When I called Bentley, he wasn't interested in talking. It was something he had to dig deep about. He was done with it, he said, before politely saying he had nothing else to say.

Understood. Integrity doesn't always make you popular, especially if it's viewed as disloyalty. But he's got my respect.

And more police officers would have the respect of the communities they serve if they chose to protect the integrity of the job over the cops who taint their profession. Because here's the thing

about cops who find themselves in these situations: More often than not they were showing signs of trouble much earlier . . . and no one did or said anything to keep disaster from happening.

On the day of the verdict, SEPTA Police Chief Thomas Nestel III tweeted: "Justice was served."

If only it was served more often.