I WAS A

HOW WE SURVIVED THE FIRST J20 TRIAL

J20 STREET MEDIC



AND

DEFENDANT

AND WHAT WE LEARNED ALONG THE WAY

During the inauguration of Donald Trump on January 20, 2017, DC police arrested over 200 people and indiscriminately charged all of them with eight or more felonies apiece, hoping to set a precedent that would suppress street protest once and for all. In this narrative, a defendant who participated in the first J20 trial block recounts the legal strategy by which they defeated the state and passes on lessons to anyone facing a similar ordeal. The author is a street medic who was arrested in the kettle on January 20, participated in the legal support organizing throughout the J20 cases, and continues to fight for a better world, undaunted by the intimidation of the police and courts.

January 20, 2017 was one of the most significant days of my life.
It was the first day of a long and trying battle for my freedom,
and the freedom of over 200 comrades
whose futures became intricately tied with mine
the moment we stepped into the streets of Washington DC
on that cold January morning.

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A STREET MEDIC

Street medics provide first aid and emergency care at sites of resistance and struggle. Strong networks of mutual support and care are essential to building a sustainable, long-term movement for collective liberation. Being a medic is about being careful with each other so we can be dangerous together. Providing this type of wellness support can be as much about long-term care as it is about being there in the moment. It is an ongoing process of assessing needs, offering resources, and uplifting those with whom we engaged in struggle.

Health care is political. Medics are activists who seek to democratize health care knowledge and skills, subvert our communities' dependence on corporate medicine, and help create the infrastructure we see as necessary to build another world. Street medics are EMTs, nurses, therapists, herbalists, teachers, comrades, and friends.

Give Care, Take Care.
Spread Calm and Do No Harm.

I became a street medic in December 2016, not long after Trump was elected President. I was motivated to do this as a way of bridging my political

convictions and my personal calling to help people recover from trauma. Earlier in 2016, I had attended massage therapy school in Florida and studied herbal medicine online. Practicing healing arts as a trade is incomplete without an analysis of the privileges and oppressions that intimately impact a person's wellness and experiences of trauma. I left Florida seeking opportunities to plug into communities of resistance and offer what I had learned in accessible ways, while continuing to learn different approaches to providing care.

I was working as a Lyft driver in Colorado during the election in November. I remember vividly the interactions I had with people I gave rides to that day and the progression of sentiments expressed to me from hopeful to concerned to shocked and terrified. Everyone I picked up was upset, angry, scared, furious, confused, disappointed, and desperate for a way out of this nightmare.



Unfortunately, we weren't dreaming—this was real and this was our life now. The question was—what would we do about it?

Hundreds of us took the streets of Denver that night, as occurred in cities all around the country; we came together for support and to collectively express our rage and grief as we confronted the reality that this was the world

we were living in. The election was a spark, a call to action, an opportunity to connect with others who were already fed up with the oppressive conditions imposed by capitalism and who now had one more reason to stand up and resist. It was really the only thing we could do.

Large-scale planning for the inauguration was already underway. A website went up and a call went out inviting people to Washington DC to disrupt the inauguration on January 20, 2017—J20 for short. Comrades across the country were holding autonomous assemblies, organizing locally, and preparing for a day of action to oppose and disrupt the symbolic transfer of power in the White House and the unapologetic emboldenment of white nationalist identity.

I knew in my heart that I needed to go. There was nothing holding me back. I was at a point in my life where I didn't have any long-term commitments, I wasn't tied down, nobody was depending on me, and I found myself not feeling concerned about what the consequences could be. I just knew it was where I wanted to be. I decided I would travel to DC not only to participate in demonstrations, but to provide care for my comrades in the streets as a medic.

Prior to my departure from Colorado, a friend and I flew to Portland, Oregon to attend a 20-hour street medic training with the Rosehip Medic Collective. I want to express deep gratitude to the Rosehips for putting together several medic trainings that winter in preparation for the inauguration. This training provided me with the skills I needed to feel confident about providing medical care at a mass mobilization bigger than anything I had ever been to before.

At the beginning of January 2017, I drove out to the East Coast to meet up with friends who were also planning to go to DC. I assembled a medic kit and attended direct action trainings and planning meetings in the days leading up to January 20. When I arrived in DC, I attended a "medic mixer" where I found someone to work alongside as my medic buddy and a group of three other medics interested in attending the same protest. We formed a team and discussed how best we would track and tend to the needs of several hundred people.

We had a practice run the night before the inauguration during the protests outside the Deploraball, at which we had our first opportunity to perform eye flushes with LAW (liquid antacid and water) to treat the effects of pepper spray. We discussed ways to keep each other safe in the streets and familiarized ourselves with the layout of the city and the metro system. We planned to meet up the following morning near the protest route.

I hardly slept that night. My adrenaline was pumping as I imagined what the following day might hold. I knew this day was going to be big. But as I would soon find out, I truly had no idea what was to come.

What I Experienced on January 20

On January 20, I met up with my medic team and we made our way to Logan Circle, the starting point of the Anti-Capitalist Anti-Fascist march. The energy was powerful as we amassed as a group of around 500 and took the streets of downtown DC.

> We have been told we are powerless.
> But we had power in numbers.
> And despite those who seek to silence us,
> Our voices would be heard.



We were being followed by riot cops from the onset. We would later learn that planning meetings for this protest had been infiltrated by right-wing groups working hand-in-hand with DC police.

But we wouldn't be silenced. While we were in the streets, we were a force to be reckoned with. It is exactly because we were powerful that we met with such strong opposition. There are not many opportunities in day-to-day life to express the deep-seated discontent we feel about the conditions under which we are forced to live. It is important to take advantage of such opportunities as outlets for our emotional experiences—which are often widely shared, even if they feel unique to us in the isolating world we live in.

Taking the streets with our comrades reminds us that *we are not alone.* That *we are not crazy for feeling this way.* That *we are not the ones who are sick, it is the system that is broken beyond repair.* Without these moments to provide a release, to uplift and inspire us and remind us why we continue to get up every morning and keep struggling to survive, we are left with not much more than a bleak and depressing reality day after day after day.

We were constantly on the move; there wasn't much time to provide medical care before the cops surrounded and contained us in the kettle. I do remember stopping to flush pepper spray from many eyes during the half hour between the time we stepped off the curb at Logan Circle and our eventual capture at the corner of 12th & L, but it was in the kettle that most of the medicking happened. Over 200 of us spent upwards of eight hours trapped on a street corner with no access to water, food, bathrooms, or anything else beyond what we collectively had on our persons.

Being a street medic that day taught me how to show up for others. I learned how to manage my own emotional state in a way that enabled me to hold space for and tend to the needs of those around me. While we were in the kettle, the riot cops attacked onlookers who had been standing across the street from us. They chased people down the street and deployed pepper spray and sting-ball grenades that made loud explosions—we could hear them but could not see the effects. With the sound of a loud "bang," a person standing beside me shrieked and began hyperventilating. They were having a panic attack. I consciously held my own emotional response to what was going on at a distance as I offered them support and care. It was empowering to find myself feeling capable of staying present and helping spread calm despite the scene that was unfolding around us.

As the cops began arresting people, I noticed that they were grabbing people closest to the perimeter, zip-tying their hands behind their backs, and putting them into police vans. I stayed toward the center of the group to avoid being taken in so I could continue to care for people on the outside, knowing that once I was cuffed and thrown in the police van there wouldn't be much more I could do. At this point, we had no idea what was going to happen to us or where they were going to take us once we were taken in.

Most of my time in the kettle was spent circulating through the group, checking in with people about how they were doing, connecting with people I already knew and making new friends, offering snacks and water, flushing eyes, treating shrapnel wounds, and advocating for people who needed further medical care. We even made soft blockades for people to go to the bathroom and resorted to using bottles and plastic bags to contain our waste. We kept morale up by singing well-known songs like *Baby I'm an Anarchist* and

Bohemian Rhapsody (though admittedly, y'all, we could really use some new songs) and using the human microphone to share communiques "from the ungovernables at 12th and L":

Fuck Trump
Fuck all politicians
With a country built on white supremacy and patriarchy
No politician can serve anything else
That goes for his police pawns, too
We may be arrested here today
But we will not be silenced
We call on communities threatened by Trump to defend themselves against fascists and racists
We won't back down and we will only grow stronger
If you're hearing this, we call on you to become ungovernable
And build a new world in the ashes of the old

Well, we're going to jail
But we aren't going silently
As we're seeing today, Trump indicates a new level of repression
But the tide of repression has been rising for some time
2 million in prison, a new Jim Crow
Surveillance on your email, surveillance on your phone, surveillance in your home
All governments imprison and police
Cops love Trump, but to get rid of both, we have to get rid of the government
From the threat of white supremacists to the threat of police
Our safety lies in building bonds with each other, outside of state control
For freedom, for anarchy!

The action continued around DC while we were in the kettle. We watched as smoke rose above buildings in the distance and learned that a limo had been set on fire a few blocks away. Checkpoints around the city were being blockaded and shut down, the Festival of Resistance was in full swing, and more and more people were assembling across the street from the kettle offering solidarity and encouragement as we awaited our arrest. The fierce resistance that continued elsewhere on the streets was a sweet reminder that while some of us had been stopped, the collective "we" would not been defeated.

When I was finally taken in around 6 pm, the cops zip-tied my wrists together behind my back, removed my shoelaces, and took all of my belongings from me. I spent four hours in a police van packed with seven others. We sang songs and played games to pass the time. Every one of us was severely dehydrated at this point; after much pleading, we were finally given some water to drink. The cops told us to tilt our heads as they poured small quantities of water into our mouths using tiny paper cups as you might find at a dentist's office. They became visibly irritated when we asked for more than a few cupsfull. We were transported to a precinct where our fingerprints were taken and we were finally allowed to use a toilet, our hands no longer bound.

They put us on a short bus to await yet another relocation to an overnight holding cell. I continued to play the medic role, advocating for someone on the bus who needed medication that the police were withholding. I reminded everyone not to talk to the cops unless absolutely necessary and gave hand and wrist massages to help ease the pain caused by zip-ties, some of which were so tight that they caused long-term nerve damage. After we continued to demand water, they gave us a red sugary drink, definitely not water, and told us we should be grateful for it. We spent what was left of the night cuddled together for warmth and comfort on a cold hard floor under bright fluorescent lights with only our pepper-spray-coated clothing to sleep on.

We spent most of the following day in an even smaller cell at the courthouse. There was a sink in our cell; it was above a toilet and the stream slowly dribbled out. We would have had to put our mouths on the metal sink in order to drink from it. We passed. A few hours before we were released, we were finally given some food, if you could call it that. Bologna and pepper spray sandwiches, washed down with absolutely nothing. Yum. I gave my rations to my cellmates and ate two mustard packets before passing out from exhaustion.

When we were called to appear in front of the judge, they put real handcuffs on us and attached them to ankle cuffs with a chain. We were referred to as "bodies" and assigned numbers which then became what we were called by. The dehumanizing element was hard to ignore. We stood in front of Judge Leibovitz as she charged each of us with one count of felony rioting. We were assigned counsel and released on our own recognisance: we didn't have to post bail but were required to return for court.

We were welcomed back into the world by a huge crowd of people cheering for us. A friend ran up to me exclaiming, "You have to see this!" and showed me the viral video of someone in black bloc punching white nationalist Richard Spencer in the face. That was exactly what I needed in that moment. There were food and drinks waiting for us and so many hugs. We were given rides to the precinct where our property was being held. We spent

the next several hours trying to get our property back and documenting what had been taken as evidence. Some medics who had not been arrested were there to help; they assisted me in documenting all the items that the police had stolen. We soon learned that anyone who was arrested with a phone that day did not receive it back.

I was eventually given a ride to my housing and spent the rest of the night watching videos from that day and catching up on everything that had happened in DC while I was detained. I drove down to North Carolina the following day. Some friends, who were now also co-defendants, were holding a debrief dinner and invited me to attend. I would spend the next several months living there, in a house with three co-defendants and some very supportive friends, working around the clock on the J20 case.

In April, a superseding indictment increased our charges to a total of eight felony charges each, including conspiracy to riot, engaging in and inciting a riot, and five counts of property damage. Some people were given additional charges such as assault on an officer and individualized counts of property damage. And just like that, we were each looking at up to seventy-five years in prison if convicted on all charges. This was a blatant attempt to criminalize dissent using prosecutorial overreach. Obviously, 200 people did not break the same five windows. The idea was to use an "aiding and abetting" theory of liability to prosecute everyone who was present in the streets that day for a few instances of damaged property. They hoped to scare us into taking pleas, intimidate us and others into inaction, and use us as an example of what could happen if you stand up to those in power.

ORGANIZING J20 LEGAL SUPPORT AND SOLIDARITY

Organizing a collective defense for J20 took a lot of hard work from a lot of dedicated people, defendants and supporters alike. For many of us, it became a full-time job. It was no small undertaking to coordinate over 200 people across the country. A listserv and weekly conference calls were our best means of keeping everyone in the loop: sharing updates and motions, communicating about legal matters, making sure everyone had housing and transportation to and from DC for court appearances, coordinating in-person defendant meetings after hearings, asking questions, offering resources, and checking in with people about whether their lawyers were being responsive. It was up to each defendant whether to engage with the infrastructure we established, and we did our best to reach out to those we hadn't heard from.

Early on in the organizing process, we established regional networks to help defendants find each other and build support locally. There were regional J20 groups in most major cities along the East Coast including DC, Baltimore, Richmond, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and New York City, and then there was a group for North Carolina at large. Having had no home base prior to J20, I was fortunate to land in a place with many other defendants nearby. We got together to participate in the spokes calls, traveled across the state to visit each other, held in-person support group meetings, coordinated rides to and from DC, shared dinners, threw benefit shows, made fundraiser T-shirts, tabled at events, and even organized a black masquerade party ("Black Masker Aid") to raise money for our regional fund and spend quality time together. The North Carolina J20 defendants became family to me. They were my core support system during that time. We continue to stay in touch to this day. I hold each of them dear to my heart.

Spokes calls were hard. They were tedious. I don't think anyone liked them. But they were important. Every Sunday at 7 pm, I would log into join.me to participate in hours-long conference calls with defendants and supporters from each region, discussing everything from legal strategy to finances to the most recent media articles that had come out about the case. Since every defendant couldn't possibly be on each call, we would compile the most important notes and give report-backs to our respective regions in an attempt to keep everyone up to date. The creation of weekly news bulletins summarizing notable developments in the case helped streamline our communication, and the development of working groups helped to shorten the weekly spokes calls by adding several more meetings to the schedule—for better or for worse. We established several groups: the "PR" media team, the legal strategy working group, the political campaign committee, finances and fundraising, a medic working group, and wellness support.

Once the court system announced the groups that would face trial together, there were calls to discuss trial strategy and logistics specific to each group and calls to coordinate between trial groups. Not everyone was inclined to participate in conference calls, so we created countless signal threads and riseup pads to provide even more avenues for staying connected. Nobody was obligated to participate, but those of us most inclined to engage with organizing efforts sometimes found ourselves on three or more calls each week in addition to the calls all of us were making to our lawyers on a regular basis.

Like I said, J20 was my full-time job.

Face-to-face meetings after each hearing in DC were crucial for connecting with co-defendants who were more or less absent from the larger organizing efforts and for deepening our connections with those we had been working

with online. We held meetings at a co-working space near the courthouse to decompress and discuss the case in person. For many defendants, this was the only opportunity to discuss what was going on.

Some of our most memorable meetings took place around the hearings for trial date selection in June. Nearly every defendant had appearances scheduled that week, and we took advantage of this to facilitate several huge collective defense meetings—followed by kickball games and support groups in Malcolm X Park, outings to Nu Vegan, and adventures in Rock Creek Park. Spending so much time in DC was emotionally draining, so we did whatever we could to boost morale and help each other take much-needed space from the tense environment of Superior Court.

There were at least six medics arrested in the kettle on J20. We came together to strategize about using the medic role as part of our legal defense in months that followed our arrest. We formed a working group that included medics from across the country wanting to help support us in the case. We came up with agreements about how we would present our legal defenses in solidarity with all of our co-defendants and in line with overarching street medic principles. We represented an ongoing struggle for street medics to be recognized—and not targeted—for providing care where care is needed. Motivated to use the strength of our medic defense to help in the larger collective defense, a few of of us decided to go to trial in November as part of the first trial block.

THE J20 LEGAL DEFENSE STRATEGY

Prior to trial date selections, the government had come out with a proposed set of groupings, placing each defendant in one of four categories based on alleged conduct and supposed affinity group affiliations. The government was intent on taking those designated as Group 1 to trial first, those in Group 2 next, and so on. The majority of defendants were lumped into groups 3 and 4, seemingly without rhyme or reason. Regardless of their motives for choosing these groupings and this order of operations, we were aware that the ones that the government was seeking to prosecute first were some of our most vulnerable comrades.

In order to undermine their plan, we devised an early trial strategy. This strategy involved defendants in Groups 1 and 2 asking their lawyers to push for their trials to occur later than the government wanted, thereby enabling individuals from Groups 3 and 4 who felt they had strong cases and good

lawyers to elect to go first. No one was pressured to make this choice. We held numerous conference calls discussing this strategy and considering the implications. This seemed like one of the best ways we could help protect each other while also turning up the heat on the prosecution. If the government aimed to strengthen its case against everyone by taking certain people to trial first in hopes of scoring easy convictions, our strategy was intended to disrupt their agenda.

We were successful in securing the first part of the strategy: in the first round of trial selection, Groups 1 and 2 were granted trials in March and April 2018 despite the government's wish to try them at the end of 2017. Next came the hard part: figuring out who would take one for the team and go to bat first. The seed had been planted, everyone knew about the early trial strategy, and all we could do was wait to see who would step up to the plate for collective defense.

I have vivid memories of the day I chose my trial date. I was sitting in the courtroom filled with dozens of co-defendants and their counsel, my lawyers on either side of me, contemplating what to do. We had several options of trial blocks to choose from, including the very first trial set for November, the second one in December, and several others that were almost a year away. Judge Leibovitz was going around the room asking counsel to choose what trial dates their clients wanted. I quietly raised the possibility with my lawyers that I could be part of the first trial. My lawyers were apprehensive. They were there to defend me, not to look out for my co-defendants; they would have preferred to watch the first trial proceedings, allowing others to take that risk so I didn't have to. But they were working for me, and it was ultimately up to me to decide what I wanted to do.

My decision to be on the first trial felt instinctual. I was there as a medic. I wasn't being accused of any particular acts beyond what everyone else was facing—and the court had randomly appointed a *very* solid legal team to represent me. This was a high-profile case and one of the biggest law firms in the country chose to take on a client pro-bono. It was by pure chance that I ended up with them. Some defendants had been assigned run-of-the-mill CJA (Criminal Justice Act) lawyers, who often represented dozens of other clients simultaneously; some of them were largely unresponsive to calls and emails. Here I was with a full team of not just one but *four* lawyers and at least three paralegals working around the clock on my case. It almost felt irresponsible not to go first.

Plus, some of my closest friends were in Groups 1 and 2. If there was anything in my power I could do to help them, I was going to do it.

There wasn't a doubt in my mind that I was making the right decision. I knew that if I had made any other decision, I would have walked out of that

courtroom regretting it. My lawyers were not excited about this, but they respected my wishes. We selected the November 20 trial date, which was later moved to November 15, or N15. Seven other defendants made the same choice. After court, we all met to start discussing how to prepare for the trial. These seven people became my second J20 family. Ultimately, only six of us would go to trial due to last-minute legal complications down the road, but for all intents and purposes, this core group stuck together from that moment on—through weekly conference calls, frequent court appearances and defendant-led meetings with all our lawyers, and living together during the six weeks of trial, all the way through to the long-awaited day of our verdict.



N15: THE TRIAL

Going to trial was its own chapter in the J20 saga. Time stood still for six weeks as Oliver, Jen, Christina, Brit, Alexei, and I sat at a table in our finest court fashion with our team of lawyers in Courtroom 203 in the Superior Court of DC. To our left sat two Federal Prosecutors: Assistant US Attorney Jennifer Kerkhoff, one of the vilest human beings I have ever had the displeasure of sharing space with, and the slightly more palatable yet equally

reprehensible Rizwan Qureshi. In the jury box sat sixteen people from across the city who had been chosen to decide our fate via a several-day jury selection process at the onset of trial; and at the bench was Judge Lynn Leibovitz, known by many as "the toughest judge in DC." Behind us, the gallery was full to the brim with co-defendants and supporters. They literally had our backs. They assured us that we wouldn't be going through this process on our own.

Trial was an emotional rollercoaster. All of us had to put our lives on an indefinite hold, tying up loose ends and making arrangements in case we were sent to prison. We were uprooted from our homes, many of us still paying rent on houses with no certainty whether or when we would return to them. In DC, we lived in Airbnbs together with our closest support people. We had no idea how long trial would take. It wouldn't be clear until the moment it was all finally over.

Day after long and grueling day was spent waking up early, putting on the nicest outfits we could assemble, grabbing something to eat, and taking the metro, riding bikes, or walking down to the courthouse from our Airbnbs in Columbia Heights. We would meet with our lawyers and hold little conferences in the hallway while waiting for the other cases to be called. Then we would spend the rest of the day wearing our best poker faces as we sat in that grim, windowless courtroom witnessing the proceedings of our trial unfold.

We sat there and watched as Kerkhoff and Qureshi presented their case, stating from the beginning that none of us was being accused of actually breaking anything. They called numerous officers and witnesses to the stand and showed video after triggering video of police body cams and aerial surveillance footage from that day. They put our hacked phone data contents on the big screen, pulled our belongings out of cardboard boxes wearing plastic gloves and held them up as though they were contaminated, and presented big foam display boards with screenshots of our alleged persons at various points during the march—a series of pixelated black clad blobs that appeared just to be walking. We worked closely with our lawyers, taking extensive notes, brainstorming counter-arguments, and digging up dirt on the bombastic lead detective, Gregg Pemberton.

Judge Leibovitz made it clear whose side she was on. After the jury had been dismissed one day, she made a ruling on probable cause in which she adamantly described us as a "swarm of bees, insects, or some kind of animal that coalesced and moved together as though pulled by a gravitational force." She also compared the case to examples of "wilding" in which a few people beat someone up and all present parties are held responsible for it regardless of who threw the punches. This follows the distorted belief that violence against a person can be equated with property damage. She ruled that there

was individualized probable cause to arrest each of us based on the movement of the "group" across sixteen blocks in thirty-three minutes, and the behavior of the "group" during that time. Although none of us were alleged to have personally caused any of the damage, nor was there evidence of our pre-existing knowledge that it would happen, she ruled that we were complicit in enabling the "riot" by not immediately leaving the protest as soon as the first windows were broken. For the six of us and many others, we were being charged on account of our presence alone.

All I can say is, *it was a good thing this was a jury trial.*

Our only opportunity to see daylight in those winter months was an hour-long lunch break that we sometimes spent decompressing and socializing with comrades on the lawn across the street, but more often in the courthouse cafeteria discussing the morning's proceedings with our lawyers.

After a full day in court, I would head directly to my lawyers' office in Chinatown, where we would spend countless hours looking through discovery footage, documenting notable scenes in highly-organized spreadsheets, talking strategy, researching the government's witnesses, and planning lines of questioning for cross-examinations the following day. Sometimes we would be there until eleven o'clock at night, doing everything we could possibly think of and then some to aid in our defense. I always looked forward to the shot of whiskey my lawyer would share with me to take the edge off after a long day's work.

My lawyers had me practice being questioned by them and cross-examined by a strong prosecutor in their law firm to prepare me for the possibility of testifying. This was a very helpful opportunity to understand just how nerve-wracking and difficult testifying can be. From this practice session, I concluded that unless it seemed absolutely necessary, testifying would not be in my best interest. They also prepared one of my best friends to testify as a character witness on my behalf. When the prosecution rested its case, we felt strongly that the government hadn't met its burden of proof and decided not to have anyone testify in my defense. Putting anyone on the stand gives the prosecution an extra opportunity to ask presumptuous and leading questions in their cross-examination that could be detrimental to the overall case no matter how you answer. It is a strategic decision that really depends on the individual case at hand. It is a decision that should not be taken lightly.

While some of my trial co-defendants chose to bring in character witnesses to testify, none of us on trial took the stand. This was a collective decision that involved many conversations about the implications and risks that testifying posed for the group; it was also a personal decision on each of our parts to hear and respect the concerns of our co-defendants. I am proud to

say that in the face of so much stress during that time, we each did our best to communicate compassionately with one another, to consider each others' concerns, and to make choices that reflected a commitment to each other above everything else.

THE VERDICT

Once the closing arguments concluded and the judge gave the jury instructions, the jurors spent several days in deliberation. Although we did not have to be present in the courtroom during this time, we were required to be within fifteen minutes of the courthouse so we could get there quickly once a verdict was reached.

All we could do was wait. We went for walks, checked out the nearby museums, read books, and took naps in the family court lounge. We had no idea how long it could be before we heard something. It was mid-December and we just about lost hope that we would receive a verdict before the court went on break for the holidays, which would mean returning in January to continue deliberations.

And then, exactly eleven months after our initial release from jail, on the Winter Solstice, December 21, 2017, when the earth reached its furthest point from the sun and began to move closer again, we received notice that the jury had come to a unanimous decision for every charge against each of the defendants on trial. We rushed to the courtroom and waited in anticipation as the jurors filed in one by one.

All six of us were facing seven charges—six felonies and one misdemeanor each. The inciting charge had been deemed multiplicitous and thrown out by the judge during the Motion for Judgment of Acquittal prior to deliberations.

The transcript reads:

THE COURT: *Good morning, ladies and gentlemen — or good afternoon, I guess. I received a note from you at 11:20. It's signed by Juror No. 11. And it says, "We have reached a verdict on all counts." I'll ask you, Juror 11, to please stand. Sir, are you the foreperson?*

THE JURY FOREPERSON: *Yes.*

THE COURT: *Has the jury reached a unanimous verdict on each and every count as*

to each and every Defendant?

THE JURY FOREPERSON: *Yes.*

I was up first.

THE COURT: *On Count 1, how do you find [Miel] on the charge of engaging in a riot?*

THE JURY FOREPERSON: *Not guilty.*

THE COURT: *On Count 2, on the charge of conspiracy to engage in a riot?*

THE JURY FOREPERSON: *Not guilty.*

THE COURT: *On Count 3, destruction of property?*

THE JURY FOREPERSON: *Not guilty.*

THE COURT: *On Count 4, destruction of property?*

THE JURY FOREPERSON: *Not guilty.*

THE COURT: *On Count 5, destruction of property?*

THE JURY FOREPERSON: *Not guilty.*

THE COURT: *On Count 6, destruction of property?*

THE JURY FOREPERSON: *Not guilty.*

THE COURT: *And Count 7, destruction of property?*

THE JURY FOREPERSON: *Not guilty.*

Tears came to my eyes. I could barely contain myself as I waited to hear the verdicts for my co-defendants. I listened intently as one by one, Jen, Christina, Alexei, Oliver, and Brit were all found not guilty on each and every one of their charges too. The jury returned not guilty verdicts on all 42 counts. We had successfully secured six complete and resounding acquittals. What a victory!

The energy of the courtroom lifted us up and carried us all the way out of the building. Everyone hugged and congratulated us. Reporters swarmed us for statements and photographs; our phones were ringing off the hook. We had won! The battle of J20 was far from over, but this triumph was something to celebrate. And celebrate we did.

For a detailed account of our trial proceedings, check out the #DropJ20 Podcast Update on itsgoingdown.org. They produced seven episodes altogether, four during this trial and three more over the following six months. You can also listen to an interview I did after my trial ended on the Ex-Worker podcast, #62: Support, Healing, and Redefining Resistance—2017 in Review, Part II (timestamp 1:10:16).

One month after our trial returned full acquittals, 129 cases were dismissed without explanation, leaving 59 defendants still facing charges. A few of those cases went to trial in the spring of 2018, resulting in acquittals and



two mistrials. There was not a single jury conviction during the entire J20 prosecution. On July 6, 2018, every remaining case was finally dismissed.

It was all over. We had won.

Our efforts for collective defense and the early trial strategy were a success. 234 people arrested, 217 indicted on a minimum of 8 felonies each, and

ZERO convictions at trial. Only 21 plea deals were taken, and only one of those was for a felony. While there were other aspects of the case that contributed to the inevitable downfall of the prosecution, it feels safe to say that the early trial strategy played a big role in destabilizing the government's case and acted as a catalyst for that sequence of events to unfold. This victory illustrates the power of collective defense and the potential that we have together. It wasn't easy. It took a lot of hard work from a lot of people to make this all possible. In the end, it was all worth it.

IF YOU ARE FACING AN ORDEAL LIKE THE J20 CASE

First, check out the article that came out soon after our arrest, "Making the Best of Mass Arrests: 12 Lessons from the Kettle During the J20 Protests". I would especially highlight #5, "Don't bring your real phone"— even if you bring a burner phone, wipe the data and destroy the sim card rather than handing it over to the cops)— #6, "Seize the chance to pass on skills"; and #7, "Care for each other." I cannot emphasize that last point enough.

Also, as a general rule of thumb, don't make things easy for the cops, don't talk to them or believe anything they say. Ever.

Here are some other suggestions.

TAKE MEDIA INTO YOUR OWN HANDS.

The narratives presented in the media do a lot to shape public opinion; they can make a big difference in influencing the outcome of a case. Working with sympathetic journalists can be a great way to avoid some of the risks of speaking in the media while facing charges. Especially when you are dealing with a political case, you have to consider the risk of being doxxed or harmed by those on the other side of the political spectrum as well as the legal risk that something you say could be used against you in court. Working with journalists who are willing to speak off the record or conduct interview anonymously or with pseudonyms can be a great way to keep yourself safe while getting the information out there in the ways that you want it to be understood.

FRIENDS MAKE THE BEST MEDICINE.

I met some of my best friends through the J20 ordeal; they gave me the strength to keep fighting and inspired me to give it my all. Not only was I fighting for myself, I was fighting for all the comrades who were in this battle with me; and together with our communities, we were fighting for the future of dissent and resistance in the United States. Working in solidarity with comrades toward a common goal can evoke a sense of belonging, a sense of purpose; it makes the whole experience feel much more meaningful.

SELF-ISOLATING IS NOT THE BEST WAY TO DEAL WITH AN EXPERIENCE LIKE THIS.

How traumatic an experience is has a lot to do with the support we receive during it and in the aftermath. One thing that really helped me get through this was the relationships I built with the people who were in it with me and those doing support who had been through something similar themselves. Times were heavy for all of us, and knowing there were other people going through it assured me I was never alone. Holding space with these people to talk about how it has affected our lives and process our feelings about it enabled me to feel seen and validated my experience of being in a low-level crisis for months on end.

So many people have to face the legal injustice system on their own. My heart truly goes out to them. I was fortunate to have co-defendants to share the experience with and seasoned comrades to provide insight into the legal system, suggest how to engage with the process, and offer tools for confronting the many challenges of being a defendant. For example, I recommend *A Tilted Guide to Being a Defendant* by the Tilted Scales Collective.

Working together can also do a lot to dissipate the anxiety and paranoia that someone might snitch or cooperate with the state. It was reported by the court that there were no snitches and no cooperation with the government on the J20 case.

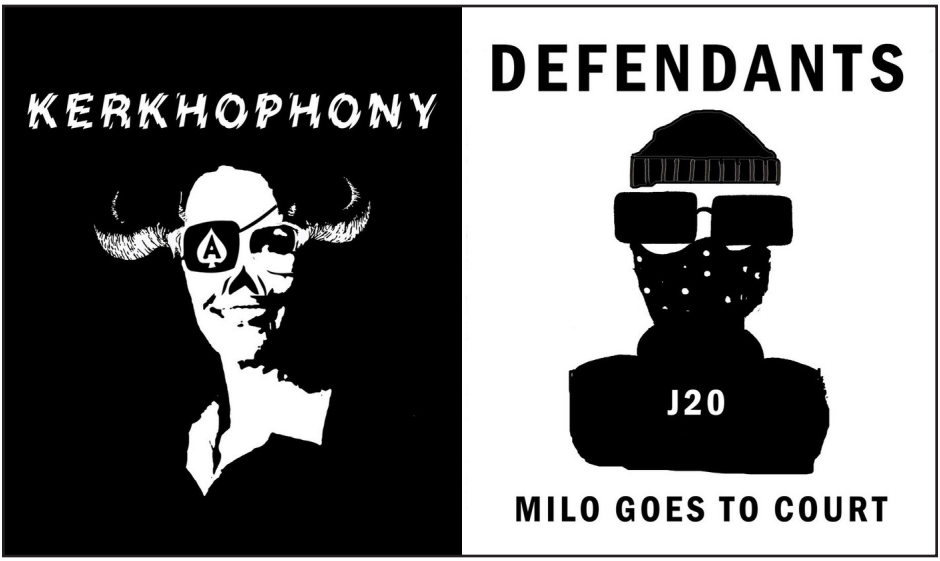
IN AN EXPERIENCE LIKE THIS, THE PUNISHMENT IS IN THE PROCESS.

The period of time between being arrested and the end of trial involves constant stress. During this time, it is especially important to prioritize self-care

and reach out for help. Regulating the nervous system is key to staying well. Take baths, go for walks, ride a bike, drink tea and read a book in a warm cozy place that feels safe. Remember to breathe. Get out in nature! Find a therapist or a support group or both. Start your own support group. Eat your favorite foods. Move your body! Hike up a mountain. Call an old friend. Let people know what you're going through. Ask for support. Do something fun to reward yourself for dealing with all the bullshit. Do yoga. Find any activity that puts you more in your body than in your head and allows you to discharge some of the activation energy that builds up from continual stress. Without a release, this energy can become stored in the body, causing discomfort, tension, and even chronic pain.

COMIC RELIEF IS A GREAT WAY TO DISCHARGE BUILT-UP STRESS.

Whether it was cracking jokes in the kettle to ease some of the tension we were all feeling that day, creating the spectacular musical parody "Now That's What I Call Kerkhophony Volume 1," or performing a ventriloquist act with a black-clad ventriloquist's dummy called Bloc-o, defendants found ways to lighten each others' hearts and evoke moments of joy in the face of unrelenting state repression. We tend to take ourselves quite seriously and it can be hard to look on the bright side sometimes, but finding ways to break from the unending stress of a legal process to have a good laugh can offer a much-needed release to soothe our tender hearts.



The stress and grief experienced in the aftermath of a traumatic event or period of time can leave a person feeling out of control and having a foreshortened sense of future. The state was attempting to take away our ability to choose how the rest of our lives would unfold. They were threatening to take away our entire lives, to murder us slowly. At twenty-seven, facing seventy-five years in a cage meant I might not see life on the other side. And though there is life behind bars, and there does exist a chance of making it to sixty or seventy years old and getting out whole and having joyous, beautiful years on the outside, this was not their intention. They were trying to stifle and kill us. We had to come to terms with this anticipatory grief while fighting like hell to keep it from happening. Our lives depended on it.

In a lot of ways, the year after my trial was more difficult for me than the year I spent facing life in prison. When trial ended, I didn't know what to do with myself. I had spent so much time solely focused on my defense and preparing for an endpoint to life as I knew it. Regardless of how implausible the charges seemed, that very real threat had been hanging over my head, preventing me from making any long-term plans or imagining what the rest of my life might look like if I didn't spend it behind bars.

Once I had my life back in my own hands, I found myself scrambling for something to do to fill the empty space that had been occupied for so long with organizing J20 defense. I went through intense periods of depression and anxiety. I wanted to do nothing and everything all at once. I experienced oversleeping and sleeplessness, and I wavered from being highly sensitive to dissociated and numb as the feelings and emotions of the past year finally had space to surface.

2018 arrived with a strange sense of loss, a lack of direction, a lot of contemplation, and a great deal of confusion. I was not facing decades in prison anymore, but I was facing the reality that life was rough before J20 and it would continue to be rough after J20.

I had spent the four years prior to my arrest traveling, untethered to any one physical location, unattached to where my journey would lead me, searching for a way to find meaning in this life. I rejected societal norms that encourage us to stay in one place, work a full-time job, get married, start a family, grow old and eventually die. I longed for something more meaningful than this generic cookie-cutter existence that accepts and upholds the conditions of a capitalist society. I sought to find a better place for myself in a world designed to isolate and alienate every single one of us.

Yet I lacked a sense of what "home" meant or what it might look like for me. I had both found and lost "community" numerous times, and had

experienced trauma and grief in a variety of forms. At the end of the day, I didn't feel like I belonged anywhere. I hadn't lived in any single place for more than six months; I felt inhibited in my attempts at fostering meaningful connections in anarchist communities due to the fact that I was seen as a transient newcomer, and people tend to be skeptical of folks who come around seemingly out of nowhere. There were people I cared deeply for, scattered in various cities across the country and around the world—and while opportunities to connect with them motivated me to keep traveling, I continually struggled to carve out space to settle and establish myself as a part of a radical community. This was one of the primary reasons that I felt compelled to go to DC in the first place. I knew where my heart was, I was certain of my politics and the struggles I wished to engage with, but I didn't have an apparent way to translate my yearnings into action. J20 was a way in.

It was also a way out. I had been worn down, repeatedly fighting an uphill battle for belonging with opposition coming from the very side I wished to fighting be on. I continually felt like an outcast with nowhere to go. I was tired of leaving one place just to land somewhere else and have the same story repeat itself over and over again; but I also found no good reason compelling me to stay anywhere. It was time to break this cycle.

I had no idea what to expect with my decision to go to DC, but at least I knew it would be something different. It took me out of the normalcy of struggling for a meager day-to-day existence and into an environment of direct confrontation and resistance. It was a chance to feel alive. It was an opportunity to engage with people from across the country and from all walks of life who shared my discontent and my yearnings for something more, something better. Even if this experience didn't help me achieve my larger goal of finding a place to call home, it would at least provide me with a momentary glimpse of what it feels like to truly exist in solidarity with comrades and allow me to recharge my drained and depleted life-force energy.

That solidarity provided me with a temporary home. It kindled a fire blazing with passion, a flaming limousine that warmed my heart and nourished the deepest part of my being. The fire burned fiercely as its flame provided light through the darkness, growing in size and intensity as one day of action became a year-and-a-half-long battle against state repression. We came together around that fire for a shared purpose: to hold each other up, to work together and fight against a common enemy, to foster relationships of support despite the government's best efforts at tearing us apart. We kept that fire burning; we fed it with our commitment to one another and watched it grow within us and beyond as solidarity actions amplified the collective heat around the world.

The thing about fire is that while it can be a source of power and strength, it also has the potential to burn us and everything else in its path. If we aren't careful, it can destroy us, incinerating our spirit and consuming everything we have worked toward all the way down to the very foundations we stand upon. Internal conflicts, unequal power dynamics, the hoarding of information or access to resources, and ego-driven attempts at gaining social capital are among the factors that contributed to the gradual extinguishment of all that we had created and the quenching of any potential for continuing to carry the torch into the next field of battle.

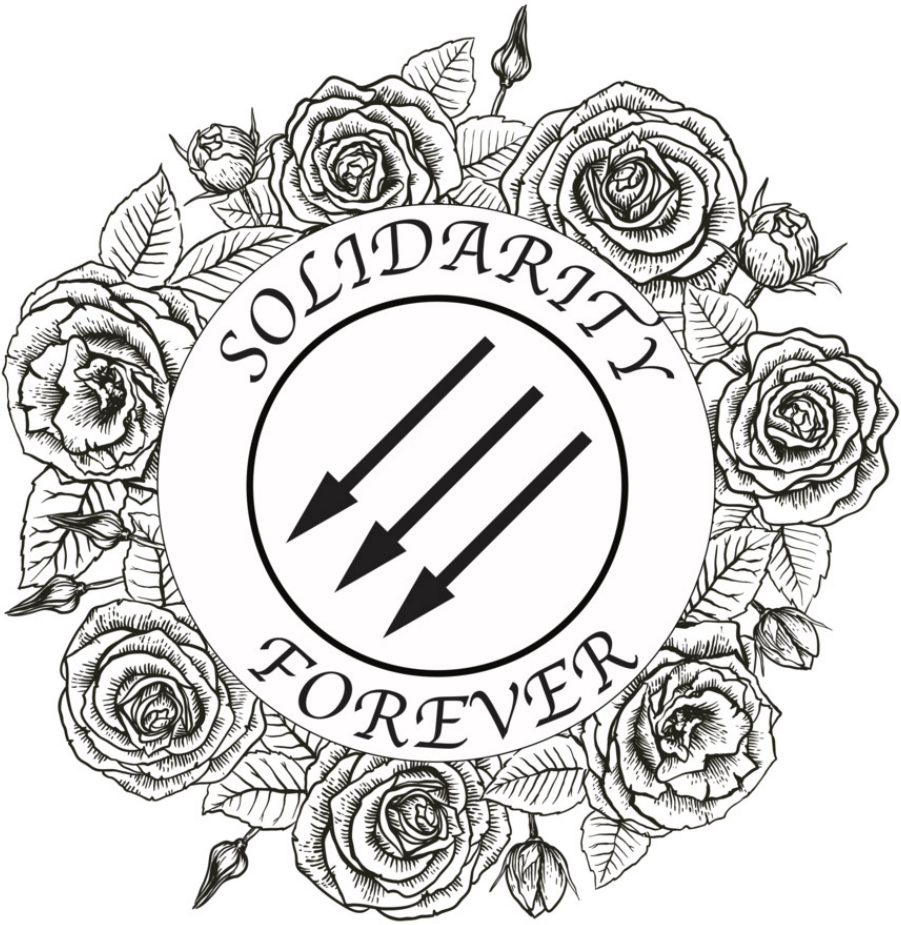
The flame has been smothered as this particular fight has come to an end, and with it, the dissipation of solidarity and support that up until this point had prevailed. It seems we have learned how to make fires—whether the fire of revolt or of immediate solidarity—but we haven't yet made hearths, homes for the fires and for ourselves, where the heat can linger a while longer, offering us solace and space to heal; nor do we have circles of hearths, the basic shape of so many human communities.

The immediate plummet of support in the aftermath was one of the hardest aspect of this whole experience. The community I had come to feel supported by dissipated as the time came to pick myself up and reconstruct a life for myself from the pile of ashes that remained. I knew that many of the people engaging with J20 organizing and support were doing so because we were directly in the line of fire, facing the barrel of the gun head-on; but part of me also believed we had cultivated something deeper than that. Once everything was over, the fallout hit hard and I found myself, yet again, feeling alone and like I didn't belong anywhere. I spent more time in 2018 just trying to stabilize myself enough to get out of bed each day than actually recovering from the year prior.

I am still coming to terms with the loss of this collective cohesion that in many ways defined my identity for a period of time. The complexities of grief reflect disintegration on a community level, the erosion of a number of personal relationships formed through the experience, and the disappearance of some of my primary support from that time. This all added another dimension to the trauma I was recovering from and made it nearly impossible to have the capacity to take on even the most familiar stressors of day-to-day life, let alone develop healthy relationships or engage in any type of organizing or activism. The world quickly became a cold and lonely place as I came to feel more and more invisible in the absence of a conspicuous crisis to avert, and without a home community to sustain me.

> *"We grow powerful, we interrupt normality, we rise up, even sparking insurrections, and in most cases we also survive the*

subsequent repression, almost completely intact. But then after we've seemingly won, we grow increasingly upset with our weaknesses, with one another, with how ugly the world remains; we avoid staring into the abyss of how much is left to do and what we're inflicting on the planet and ourselves, and we give up in a way. We lose one another, we move away from the fire and into the cold, alone, a million of us in nearly the exact same circumstance, yet each one alone."



This brings me to consider what "support" actually means and looks like in the aftermath of state repression and, for those convicted, post-incarceration. How can we carve out space for the grief and the emotional ebbs and flows necessary to integrate such lived experiences into our personal narratives and

histories? How can we find ways to establish ongoing long-term support for ourselves and each other while we continue to come face-to-face with a never-ending influx of crises? How can we build our capacity and our resilience knowing there will never be an end to the struggle? What can we learn from this and how can we do things differently in the future to mitigate the fallout from circumstances such as these? How can we keep that fire burning from one battle to the next, allowing it to continue to nourish us, so we might cultivate the strength to stick together and build upon our greatest potential?

I hope to always carry with me the memory of warmth provided by the ephemeral flame of resistance sparked on that unforgettable day and the year that followed, so I might be fortunate enough to feel it again someday.

Let's remember to be gentle with ourselves and with one another as we acknowledge that life under capitalism is an ongoing and inescapably traumatic experience; that we are all doing the best we can; that we all have a basic need for care and compassion on an ongoing basis; and that we really do need each other.

WE CAN'T PREVENT TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES FROM HAPPENING TO US, BUT WE CAN BUILD OUR CAPACITY TO KEEP GOING.

The conditions in which we are forced to exist are hostile to our survival, adverse to our natural inclinations, and detrimental to our overall individual and collective well-being. This is exactly why must we seek to disrupt and abolish the foundations and infrastructures that perpetuate these conditions and work to create a new world in the shell of the old.

It is my wholehearted desire that we will find more ways to provide each other with long-term care and wellness support in the face of state repression and in the aftermath, when we attempt to put the pieces of our lives back together so we can get up to fight another day. Supporting and sustaining long-term movements of resistance takes an understanding of the diverse ways we are affected by the situations we find ourselves in and finding tools and approaches to care that help us maintain resilience in the face of perpetual class war and ongoing opposition.

The totality of this experience motivated me to continue deepening my exploration of healing practices and expanding my knowledge of medicine. It inspired me to dedicate myself to studying the psychological impacts of trauma, stress, and grief on the nervous system and overall well-being that are so deeply tied to our identities and our experiences of privilege and oppression in this world. It is my goal to acquire the skills

necessary to offer accessible health care to those who need it most while continuing to focus on building long-term resiliency in the communities I inhabit.

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On behalf of all the N15 trial defendants, I want to give a huge shout out to everyone who was there for us during trial. Our hearts are filled with love and appreciation for all our co-defendants and supporters, our friends, families, partners, housemates, and comrades who traveled to DC, who showed up day in and day out to sit in that courtroom in dashing court attire, who showed us unwavering support during those six long and challenging weeks of trial. Thank you for being there for us and for reminding us that we were not alone. We couldn't have done it without all of you. Thanks to everyone who took or transcribed court notes, brought us snacks and gave us hugs during breaks, took us out for drinks, bought us massages, and made sure we had fun whenever possible. Thank you to the Brighter Days Collective for walking my dog for me every day while I was in court; to everyone who sent us letters of encouragement and care packages filled with sweet gifts, herbs, tinctures, zines, and more; to those who were willing to testify on our behalf as character witnesses; and to those who hosted us on breaks and helped us carve out time away from DC to take care of ourselves. A very special thanks to the amazing humans of the Pots and Pans Kitchen Collective for providing us with three meals per day, every day, giving us one less thing to worry about; and for bringing lunches to the courthouse and making it easier for supporters to continue to show up for us by feeding them as well. Thanks, too, to anyone who helped Pots and Pans by participating in meal trains, and to anyone else we may have forgotten. We also want to extend the utmost gratitude to our incredibly dedicated and hard-working team of lawyers; without them none of us would be here to tell the story of our success. We deeply appreciate each and every one of you!

In closing, I want to share a poem I wrote on the one-year anniversary of J20. This poem was written to all of my co-defendants and specifically to the 59 defendants who were still facing charges after the majority of the cases were dismissed. At the two-year anniversary, I am so relieved to say we no longer have anyone facing charges from that day, none of us are in prison, and I still feel as deep a connection to these comrades as I did when I originally wrote this.

ONE YEAR AGO TODAY

A LOVE POEM TO MY CO-DEFENDANTS

one year ago today,
all of us were in washington dc.
we took to the streets to disrupt the inauguration of donald trump.
we stood together in solidarity with each other and every
person who is oppressed,
every person who is faced with living in a world where profit
and hate dominate.
we came together,
from every corner of these so-called united states
to oppose this neo-fascist regime,
to oppose this president,
and all presidents,
to oppose all forms of hierarchy and manipulations of power.
to show our strength,
to stand up,
alongside one another, *together.*
to show our resistance,
our commitment to the struggle for our lives,
for all life.
to fight for a world worth living in.

one year ago today,
many of us met each other for the first time.
we didn't know each other's names,
yet we knew we were on the same team.
black clad warriors
standing together
engaged in a class war,
in a social war.
a war on war.
we swarmed the city with our hearts as our compass.
we made our messages known.
we embraced a diversity of tactics
guided by the same principles
of unity,

of solidarity,
of resistance.

one year ago today,
we set the city ablaze.
we disrupted the inauguration,
we disrupted the flow of capital,
we disrupted the illusion of normalcy.
we fought back against corruption, greed, and violence.
we fought back against the coercive power structures
that attempt to dictate how we live our lives.
we showed the world that we were a threat to the status quo.
we showed the world that we would not back down.
we showed the world that we are not afraid.
we showed the world that we are ungovernable.

one year ago today,
we were met with force.
the powers that be attempted to stifle our dissent.
they attempted to shut us down,
to silence us.
because they knew we were a threat.
they knew we had the potential to make change.
so they attacked us with their weapons,
they brutalized us,
they surrounded us, and
they trapped us.
they arrested us,
and they threw us in cages,
because they didn't know what else to do with us.
they may have stopped us, slowed us down,
but they did not break us.
they did not defeat us.

one year ago today,
and in the days and months that followed,
we were all charged with felonies.
felonies that threatened us
with more time behind bars
than any of us has spent living.

felonies that put our lives on hold,
that were held over our heads,
and altered our ability to have control
over how we spend our time.

we spent the next 365 days
enduring the punishment,
the punishment in the process
of the criminal injustice system.

we also spent those 365 days
investing our time and our energy
in each other.
we committed ourselves to the ongoing battle
for freedom,
for everyone.
we committed ourselves to supporting one another,
to sharing information and resources,
to building our networks,
to expanding our communities,
to strengthening our convictions,
to continuing to struggle
against the state,
against state repression,
against all forms of oppression;
against the silencing of our voices,
against the weakening of our movement.
we committed ourselves
to continuing to struggle
against that which seeks to destroy all that is worth living for.

one year ago today,
and in the days and months that followed,
we created something beautiful.
we formed a collective of strong, resilient people
dedicated to resistance,
dedicated to fighting these charges tooth and nail.
dedicated to each other.

one year ago today,
i found some of the bravest people i know.
one year ago today,
i found strength amongst people whom i truly admire.
one year ago today,
i found over 200 of my new best friends.
my greatest comrades.
one year ago today,
we found each other.
and one year later,
we have not lost one another.

while many of us are no longer facing charges,
many of us still are.
and as we go into the next year of this battle
we remain standing, side-by-side.

we are all in this together.
and we are not going anywhere
until all of us are free.

to the remaining J20 defendants,
i want you all to know—
you are not in this alone.
you will not be forgotten. you are **seen**.
and you are **loved**.
and you are **important**.
and we will get through this,
together,
no matter what happens next.

with endless love and rage,
Xx

This is part of a series looking back on the events of J20 and the legal struggle that followed it. Check out the rest of the series:

- Anarchist Resistance to the Trump Inauguration
- We've Got Your Back: The Story of the J20 Defense
- Between the Sun and the Sea: Icarus at 12th and L—A Voice from the J20 Black Bloc and Kettle on the Practice of Anarchy
- J20 Protest Simulator—Choose Your Own Adventure in the Streets and Courts of Washington, DC

For additional perspective on how to survive the turbulent aftermath of social movements, consult our four-part series from 2013, "After the Crest."



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