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Ten years ago, Patreese Johnson, a black 19-year-old from New Jersey, was a self-described homebody and a lesbian who was not yet out to her family. On a hot night in August, she and a group of six friends, all lesbians, decided to have a night out in the West Village, a New York neighborhood known then to be a safe haven for LGBTQ people.

As a group of young women out at night, it was not surprising that a man called out to them and harassed them in the street, making sexual remarks.

It was also not surprising that when they rejected his advances and began to walk away, he became angry.

What is still surprising to Johnson is just how angry he got.

After telling him they were gay, he lunged at Johnson's best friend, Renata Hill. Johnson had a pen knife for protection and stabbed at him in the abdomen. A couple of bystanders jumped in to assist them but left before police came and arrested the seven women.

Four of them, dubbed the NJ4, chose to fight the charges – gang assault, assault and attempted murder. None of them had records.

All four lost.

The film "Out in the Night" follows their stories in and after prison and the miscarriages of justice that put them there in the first place. It will be screened Oct. 27 at Portland's Clinton Street Theater, hosted by Social Justice Fund NW's Gender Justice Learning Group.

Who has the right to self-defense?

Although the events in the film might be infuriating, even shocking, to white viewers, the experiences of these women are no anomaly.

"I think really this story is more common than people realize," said Dianne Riley, Oregon director of Social Justice Fund NW. "It's not something that is super visible, certainly not in pop culture. ... People are not really truly conscious of how common it is for women of color, queer women of color, non-conforming – especially around gender – folks, people who are poor, to be really targeted as perpetrators, instantly identified as problematic and suspect, and for us to not be able to get what most people would consider basic services."

When the NJ4 went to trial, they were tried as a group. They were brought in front of an all-white jury, who had more than likely seen their faces plastered across tabloids labeling them a "gang of killer lesbians" and a "wolf pack" and a judge who, Johnson said, argued that self-defense was not a believable defense in court.

And yet these women did not think they had any choice other than self-defense.

"If we would have chosen to call 911 instead of defending ourselves, one of us would be dead," Hill said in the film.

Johnson said she grew up being harassed by police officers and witnessing police brutality and street crimes in her neighborhood. Her brother was shot and killed by a police officer when she was 11.

"That night happened, none of us really thought about calling the police," Johnson said.

Johnson and her friends didn't question that they



The film "Out in the Night" follows the stories of Venice Brown (from left), Terrain Dandridge, Patreese Johnson and Renata Hill.

PHOTO BY LYRIC CABRAL /COURTESY OF "OUT IN THE NIGHT"

In their defense

The film 'Out in the Night' tells the stories of four young, LGBTQ women of color who protected themselves from violence only to be prosecuted, maligned and imprisoned

had the inalienable right to defend their own bodies from attack. Yet it was their self-defense that cost them the years they each spent behind bars.

"I think that self-defense is something that is not used to defend the people that it should," said Blair Dorosh-walther, the director of "Out in the Night." "For me, it's very clearly a matter of self-defense, and I think that brings up issues of who has the right to defend themselves."

The day after it happened, Dorosh-walther heard about the assault in the news and was involved as an activist right away. But she didn't think she, as a white filmmaker, should be the one to direct a film about these women.

Two years later, the women's appeals were approaching, the media coverage was dying down, and she began to rethink making a film. She

reached out to the women's families and the women themselves through letters.

"I don't totally believe that just anybody should be able to tell anybody's story, but I also don't believe that you can only tell certain stories," Dorosh-walther said. "So with this, we kind of clicked. It felt right."

The film follows the stories of the four women – Johnson, Hill, Venice Brown and Terrain Dandridge – as, one by one, they are released from jail. Johnson was released last, in 2014.

Safety in a rigged system

"Out in the Night" paints a picture of the hostility these four women faced from the media,

the justice system and the prison system. It depicts the hostility they faced on the streets of a space that used to be explicitly for them.

"To me it was really important to talk about the queer civil rights-ish movement that was taking place being co-opted by marriage, when walking down the street, safety is a really big issue for many people in the queer community," Dorosh-walther said.

Johnson and her friends knew the West Village as a safe space for LGBTQ folks – especially LGBTQ youths. The West Village was where LGBTQ youths who had been kicked out of their homes would go to try to find safety and community. But gentrification had begun to make the West Village a tourist destination the city of New York had a vested interest in policing and "cleaning up," Johnson said.

New York's "reputation is the city that never sleeps," Johnson said. "Are you kidding me? People try to say you shouldn't have been out there. Are you kidding me? But it's cool for another tourist from another country to be out there until 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning going to a club, right? But we can't go out onto the pier and watch the water and laugh and giggle."

Johnson doesn't go to the West Village much anymore. But the last time she did, she didn't see people of color on the pier like she used to.

This sentiment hits close to home in Portland, which not only has been called the whitest city in the U.S. but is also considered one of the most gentrified. People of color and people in poverty are being pushed out of their neighborhoods and farther east, where housing is more affordable.

The screening

Social Justice Fund NW's Gender Justice Learning Group is a fundraising and learning group that organizes around gender justice. Social Justice Fund NW is working to "democratize fundraising," Riley said, by engaging volunteers from diverse backgrounds to organize to raise money for their grantees, rather than the money being supplied and controlled by a board of directors.

This film falls in line with the fund's belief that "race and class are core pieces to thinking about liberation," Riley said, as it explores the NJ4's intersecting identities, and the multiple levels where these identities were put under fire.

And as social media and technology have brought attention to police brutality against the black community, this film also raises awareness of the many different systems that conspire against people of color.

"I think part of what makes it really relevant right now is there's this heightened awareness, not just locally but nationally, around how police, among many other aspects of the justice system, as well as many other aspects of our modern life – how these systems that we have set up are just really rigged against people of color, people who don't have a ton of wealth, people who are different, people who do not conform," Riley said.

The present and the future

All four women are now in different stages of working and going to school. Renata Hill is working on her master's in social work. Johnson, whose felony has made it difficult to procure a job, is attending a new re-entry program. All four women struggle or have struggled with housing and getting jobs because of their records.

Yet throughout it all, Johnson stays tirelessly positive. While in prison, she became an advocate for women who had been convicted for defending themselves from domestic violence. She and Hill travel to show the film and talk about their experiences and their activism.

Johnson's dream is to one day open a therapeutic spa that could serve as a safe space for all people, especially for women and LGBTQ people, and offer different methods of therapy and meditation to help let go of stress.

"I'm just the seed of many seeds that's trying to make change," she said.

Johnson said that she doesn't regret going to prison, as it opened her eyes to so many social issues, which kick-started her activism. Yet she no longer feels safe on the streets at night, and she no longer feels safe with police or the justice system.

"That's always the question I ask myself now," Johnson said. "Do I fight back or I don't? If I fight back, I go to jail. If I don't fight back, I'm basically, you know, I'm going to die."

But that night, those four women did fight back. They fought back against someone who attacked them for saying no. They fought back against racially charged accusations and homophobic depictions in the media. They fought back in prison, advocating for others. And they continue to fight back, despite the odds. Because even though systems on every level are telling her she doesn't have the right – are locking her up for exercising it – Patreese Johnson knows that she does.

"I have every right to protect my body."