

**Female voice:** A listener note: This episode contains audio of a police shooting.

[Kris Smith singing, car horns honking]

**Narrator Eleanor Klibanoff:** It's a Sunday night in late May 2020 and the party's popping at 26th and Broadway.

**Kris Smith:** 26th! Dino's see y'all there!

**Narrator:** This is a well-known and rowdy corner in Louisville's predominantly Black West End, with a nightclub, some stores and a barbecue restaurant called Yaya's.

**Narrator:** It's a clear, warm summer night. A guy named Kris Smith is livestreaming on Facebook — showing off the growing crowd.

**Kris Smith:** We out here, you see Dino's.

**Narrator:** People are hanging out in the glow of the gas station parking lot, under a marquee announcing — cigarettes, lottery, checks cashed. It's a normal Sunday — until it's not.

**Kris Smith:** Police just came!

**Narrator:** It's not just the police — it's the Kentucky National Guard too. They roll up in military vehicles, armed in riot gear. The police have pepper ball guns at the ready.

**Kris Smith:** Look, they all got their guns out.

**Narrator:** People start fleeing —

**Kris Smith:** Shots fired, shots fired.

**Narrator:** Kris Smith narrates — There's a shot fired from inside one of the businesses on the corner and then — a barrage of gunfire from law enforcement.

[gun shots]

**Kris Smith:** Shots fired, shots fired.

**Narrator:** When the chaos subsides, a man is lying dead on the floor.

[Dig theme music in]

**Narrator:** It's David McAtee, Yaya, the Barbecue Man, the last person anyone thought would die this way. McAtee was a friend to the police — he fed them for free — in an effort to bridge this divide between police and the people who live in this neighborhood.

**Narrator:** For years, Louisville had claimed to be building these bridges between police and Black communities. David McAtee's life represented the promise of what Louisville could have been — and his death — represented just how far they'd fallen from that aspiration.

**Narrator:** The story of how we got here — not that day, not that weekend, but over the course of the previous five years in Louisville, Kentucky — well, it makes McAtee's death a lot less shocking — but all the more tragic.

**Narrator:** This is Dig, Season Two, from the Kentucky Center for Investigative Reporting and Newsy. I'm Eleanor Klibanoff.

[music out]

[driving ambient sound]

**Narrator:** Will Pitts lives in a red brick house with his wife and five kids. It's in Newburg, a diverse neighborhood in Southern Louisville. But many weekends, Will gets in his Hummer and drives west.

**Will Pitts:** It's the West End, it's home.

**Narrator:** Will is driving down Broadway, a main thoroughfare in Louisville. It runs from the edge of the Highlands, a wealthy, mostly white neighborhood, through downtown, with its municipal buildings and tourism districts.

**Narrator:** Once you cross 9th Street, though, Broadway changes — and Will Pitts starts to feel at home.

**Will Pitts:** You just got to be from this area to, I guess, understand it. What I mean by that is really just the hustle and bustle of the environment and the people that look like me and understand me, you know, it's priceless.

**Narrator:** The West End is predominantly Black. About 40 percent of people in the West End live below the poverty line, compared to just 14 percent in the whole county. Will grew up here poor, raised by a single mother. His dad was murdered before he was born. From a young age, he remembers being harassed and stopped by the police.

**Will Pitts:** As a young black man, you're a target. You know, in my group of kids, I mean, friends that I grew up with, all they wasn't saints, all of them, I can admit that, But they weren't the devil either.

**Narrator:** Will found a path out of the West End through basketball — he had some coaches take an interest in him and get him on a good path. Now he's a businessman, a basketball coach, a father. But he keeps coming back to the neighborhood that raised him.

**Will Pitts:** Even if you get away, you have to come back and feel it and taste it and smell it. It's an undescrivable feeling.

**Narrator:** For years, he spent most weekends down at 26th and Broadway, hanging out with his good friend, David McAtee.

**Narrator:** Will and David McAtee grew up together in the West End. They're opposite in looks: Will is tall and lanky, with close cut hair and light skin. David McAtee was shorter, stockier, with long braids.

**Narrator:** Just like Will, David McAtee grew up and left the West End. He moved to Atlanta, where he worked in kitchens.

**Will Pitts:** Definitely a good cook, he wouldn't give up his spices. It's like the KFC recipe, you know, you only know it if you know it.

**Narrator:** McAtee moved back to Louisville almost a decade ago. With Yaya's BBQ he was building the business he'd always dreamed of, giving back by feeding the community that made him who he was.

**Narrator:** He decided to open his restaurant at 26th and Broadway. That corner came with a built-in clientele — and some built-in problems.

**Will Pitts:** It's dead smack in the hood...you have the people who is a little mentally disturbed, the less desirables, the thieves and the killers and the robbers and you have all that around you.

**Narrator:** But David McAtee kept the peace. Will says Yaya's Barbecue was like the eye of the storm.

**Will Pitts:** You know what the eye is? It's the most calmest place. Everything else going on around it is chaos. OK? And that was that.

**Narrator:** David McAtee maintained that calm thanks to the relationships he had with people in the West End — and in the police department.

**Will Pitts:** That was the mutual respect with him and the police, they appreciated how he ran his business. And he appreciated them, showing him the love. As well as, you know, feeding their stomachs, good food, you know, that'll bring them in too, but um, that grew the relationship.

**Narrator:** LMPD Officer Dexter Pitts says stopping in at Yaya's was a highlight of the area —

**Dexter Pitts:** You could just drive past and smell the, smell the barbecue and see the smoke billowing out from his grill. And like I say...one of the nicest guys I've ever met...he would offer me food. I offer him money, like your money's no good here, man. Thank you for what you do. Thanks for looking after the community.

**Narrator:** That relationship was a rare thing. The police were IN the West End — a lot — but it wasn't usually to eat barbecue and shoot the breeze. Past the 9th Street Divide, the police are often seen as more of an *occupying force* than *Officer Friendly*.

**Narrator:** There are historical reasons for this, going back to slavery, through segregation. But a lot of it is much more recent — Louisville police have targeted parts of the West End with harsh policing tactics aimed at getting guns and drugs off the street. Their officers have been caught up in scandal after scandal, weakening trust in the department at a time violent crime was climbing.

**Narrator:** And back when David McAtee opened Yaya's Barbecue — tensions were especially high, after a string of high profile police killings around the country — and a national protest movement declaring Black Lives Matter.

**Narrator:** For years, it's felt like the kindling was just piling up — and all it would take was a spark to set the whole city ablaze.

[chanting from protests after Breonna Taylor was killed]

**Protestor:** Say her name!

**Crowd of protestors:** Breonna Taylor!

**Narrator:** That spark was the killing of Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old emergency room technician. The Louisville police were investigating her ex-boyfriend for selling drugs, and came to her apartment with a search warrant to look for evidence. Taylor's boyfriend thought they were intruders and fired one shot, striking a sergeant in the leg. Three officers returned fire, killing Taylor in her hallway.

**Narrator:** As outrage grew over Taylor's death, exacerbated by other high-profile killings of Black people across the country, a protest movement unlike anything this city had seen took hold.

[Sounds of Louisville Metro Police Department officers speaking through bullhorns to protestors, telling them to disperse]

**Narrator:** The protests started in late May 2020. That first weekend, there were dozens of arrests. Seven people were shot from within the crowd. The police deployed tear gas and pepper balls.

**Male voice:** Let me know when to shoot.

**Narrator:** There was a citywide curfew. The Mayor asked the Governor to send the state police and the National Guard.

Will Pitts watched all this... on the news. He spent most of that weekend where he usually was — about two and a half miles west of the protest activity, at Yaya’s Barbeque.

**Will Pitts:** The three or four days they was here dealing with Breonna Taylor protests. You could see it progressively, something is getting ready to happen and it's not going to be good.

**Narrator:** That weekend, downtown looked like a warzone — smashed windows, spray painted buildings, a thin haze of tear gas hanging in the air. But by Sunday night, after another night of mass arrests — downtown had mostly quieted down. LMPD would later say they’d heard protesters were planning to regroup in the West End.

**Narrator:** So LMPD officers and the National Guard in riot gear got into military vehicles and sailed down Broadway, 17 blocks, where they encountered — a party.

<<Kris Smith singing along to rap music>>

**Narrator:** People were hanging out in the parking lot of the gas station and outside the nightclub. Yaya’s was open, feeding the crowd. David’s nephew, Marvin McAtee, was inside the restaurant when law enforcement arrived. He says he was watching the security camera.

**Marvin McAtee:** And I looked over and I seen normal things. And then I saw, hold on, a whole lot of trucks coming in, you know, so I just, you know, it was normal because there's always something going on anyway.

**Narrator:** Marvin went and told his uncle that, quote, “the marshals, or whoever,” were there.

**Marvin McAtee:** So when I said it to him, it was not even in his mind to worry about it, cause he’s used to it too.

**Narrator:** Will Pitts wasn’t too worried either.

**Will Pitts:** I'm like, man, here they go again.

**Narrator:** But he told McAtee it was time to get in his car and make the drive home to Newburg.

**Will Pitts:** But tonight, I'm not for it. I been here with you man, I love you, your peoples is here, we always you know, 'You gone call me tomorrow?' Those are his favorite words, you gonna call me tomorrow? Aight. So yea, I'll call you tomorrow.

**Narrator:** When the police arrived, they had pepper ball guns and riot shields. They started ordering everyone to leave the corner. Some people ran into Yaya's, and an LMPD officer pursued them, firing several pepper balls, including at least one that seemed to strike McAtee's niece. Marvin was there —

**Marvin McAtee:** He sees her in the door. So on the way to getting her out of the door, he's basically saying, I'm getting my niece out of the way and shutting this door, you feel me? In the midst of all of that, peoples was trying to run in and come in, just scared people running wild. So he shot a warning shot off as a businessman about his residential, like you can't run over. Don't bring that over here.

**Narrator:** David leaned out the door twice, firing his gun each time. LMPD and National Guard officers returned 19 bullets.

**Marvin McAtee:** When he first fell, I just thought he got shot in the shoulder.

**Narrator:** He'd been struck in the chest. Marvin was taken out of the restaurant by the police —

**Marvin McAtee:** When they took me out, they said code red, meaning he's dead. But at that time, I was so numb to what happened that I didn't realize I was on the front line of the war.

**Narrator:** At that moment, Louisville did feel like it was at war — with its own citizens. And David McAtee, Yaya, this beloved community figure, this bridge between the police and the community, this business owner, mentor, friend, son, uncle, partner — he was just the latest casualty.

<<music>>

**Narrator:** When Louisville woke up Monday morning, after a bruising weekend of protests, it was to the news that law enforcement had shot and killed another Black person. It hit the city like a sucker punch. I'd been out covering protests all weekend til 2, 3 am. But as soon as I saw this news, I grabbed my reporter kit and headed out to 26th and Broadway.

**Narrator:** When I got there, I stopped the first person I saw — he didn't want to give his name.

**MAN #1:** I don't know man, it happened last night, somebody fired off a shot, that's what they're saying, and he ended up getting hit, and he's been on this corner for five years, five or six years,

**MAN #2:** *It ain't Avon, is it?*

**MAN #1: No, his nickname is Yaya —**

***Eleanor Klibanoff: Is it David McAtee?***

**MAN #1: David McAtee is his real name.**

**Narrator:** He waved towards the crowds gathering behind him.

**MAN #1: I come to check on this building for a friend of mine but I didn't know when I got down here, I didn't know the scene was gonna actually going to be like this."**

**Narrator:** That scene is one that will stick with me for the rest of my life. On one side of the street, dozens of people were gathering. At this point, they weren't protesting, or chanting, or marching. They were... grieving.

**Narrator:** Across the street from this growing crowd was a line of police officers in riot gear. They were guarding the body of David McAtee, which was still lying on the ground almost 10 hours later.

**Narrator:** I stopped Carmen Jones, a young woman I recognized from the protests downtown, and asked her why she was out there that morning.

**Carmen Jones: We're dying out here still. This is not doing nothing but making it worse. The reason why we're out here now is because y'all are killing us senselessly...[voice rises] They are ready to beat us down like this is the 50's dog. This is supposed to be 2020. What is going on? What is going on? My ancestors did not die and get chained and get beaten and get chased by dogs for me to still have to go through this today. I'm 23 years old. I shouldn't have to do this. I shouldn't have to, I shouldn't have to see that.**

**Narrator:** The tension radiating between these two sides was unbelievable. It felt like one wrong move would unleash decades of pent up anger and emotion. The police and the community were separated only by Broadway — the four lanes of asphalt felt like a force field — neither side could cross it — if they did, all hell would break loose.

**Narrator:** It was a stark physical representation of exactly the problem that brought Louisville to this crisis point — a police department and a community that were at war with each other.

**Narrator:** Bishop Dennis Lyons, a pastor who knows the McAtee family, showed up and immediately understood the problem.

**Bishop Lyons: There was not a person on the police force that had a relationship with the Black community, that the Black community respected enough, that could brought that situation down.**

**Narrator:** Lyons was someone who *could* bridge that gap. He's a community elder who has long tried to cultivate a relationship with the police department. He walked across the street and talked to the LMPD officer supervising the scene, who explained they were still waiting for the coroner to come pick up McAtee's body.

**Bishop Dennis Lyons:** **And that's when I was able to go back and say Hey, hey, listen, listen. The problem is, the holdup is they're waiting on the coroner. He's on his way down.**

**Narrator:** More pastors showed up and started handing around a megaphone. Here's Dr. Steven Kelsey.

**Dr. Steven Kelsey:** **"Because the body's been here too long already. But, listen to me. What I want you to do: I want you to maintain peace. Cause I don't want to see another one of us, that look like you, and look like me, laying in these streets. Let's do this (fades).**

**Narrator:** As community leaders stepped in to bridge that gap, some of the tension receded — temporarily. People crossed the street to talk to the police officers — some shouting, some seeking real conversation. The Mayor came by with a police escort to hug McAtee's mother. There was cheering and demands for answers. Someone threw a water bottle at a passing car; others shouted them down. The crowd was clearly torn between its white-hot rage and its desire to maintain peace.

**Narrator:** Finally, more than 13 hours after David McAtee was killed, the coroner showed up.

**Narrator:** Sadiqa Reynolds is the president and CEO of the Louisville Urban League. She was there that morning.

**Sadiqa Reynolds:** **I imagined that when they brought his body out, it was going to be crazy when they tried to move him. And I thought, you know, what can we do, we have got to figure out how to get out of here alive.**

**Narrator:** Reynolds called Pat Matheson, a local singer she knew had been performing at a funeral earlier that morning.

**Sadiqa Reynolds:** **And there was an officer that seemed to be in charge. I asked the officer, I said, 'Can you just give us some kind of sign at the moment you are going to move his body?' And I said, 'Put Pat on the bullhorn, please.' And I said 'Pat, just sing, just sing until we tell you to stop.'**

**[Singing begins] AMAZING GRACE, how sweet the sound. That saved, a wretch like me...**

**[song runs under Reynolds + narration]**



**Sadiqa Reynolds:** Her singing really caused the energy to shift. And I know there were people who were frustrated, they wanted someone to pay for what happened to David McAtee. But my goal on that day was to ensure that people who are in so much pain and probably very clearly willing to risk their lives, lived to fight another day.

**Through many dangers, toils and snares...**

**Narrator:** David McAtee's family walked across the street to see his body, watched by hundreds of eyes, on both sides of the street.

**Narrator:** It was just like Will Pitts said — it was like being in the eye of the storm. For a moment, there was silence. For a moment, there was calm.

**Narrator:** But, it was just a moment. That chasm between the police and the people was still there — in fact, it was deeper than ever. That day just confirmed what so many already knew — if the West End wanted peace — if they wanted justice — if they wanted safety — they were going to have to get it for themselves.

**[And that same old grace, will lead, me home.]**

**[Fades on people cheering]**

**Narrator:** Almost two weeks later, David McAtee's family and friends gathered to lay him to rest.

**Marvin McAtee:** This is Friday, this is our best day, me and Unc loved Fridays, it's the best day, we'd go down there, we'd chill, we'd lay back...

**Narrator:** Marvin McAtee spoke to reporters at the wake —

**Marvin McAtee:** A couple days ago, you know, I was doing things at the shop, I can hear him saying to me, 'You know you ain't doing that right.' (laughs) You know what I'm saying, so that feeling in the shop, I love that energy in the shop cause he's there with me, you know.

**Narrator:** A reporter asked if he was going to keep Yaya's Barbecue open.

**Marvin McAtee:** Yes sir.

**Narrator:** On Saturday, at the funeral, a string of pastors took to the pulpit to offer remarks, including Bishop Dennis Lyons. Lyons was the pastor who spoke with the police that day out at 26th and Broadway.

**Narrator:** He also runs a funeral home, which had prepared David's body for that day, dressed him in a crisp, white suit, laid him in a black coffin, tucked his long braids neatly under his head.

**Bishop Dennis Lyons: To all my brothers and sisters, I bring you greetings from the Gospel Missionary Church at 34th and Vermont. Also the Voice of Louisville civil rights organization.**

**Narrator:** Lyons' eulogy was captured by WDRB News, a local TV station.

**Narrator:** Lyons was there to remember David McAtee's life and help make sense of his death. He was also trying to glue back together a community that had been shattered into pieces. Protests were still raging downtown. McAtee's death had been like lighter fluid on an already blazing fire.

**Bishop Dennis Lyons: Was the young people saying, justice, peace, when do we want it? We're not going to wait for no meeting, we're not waiting for no review. We're not gonna wait for some hors d'oeuvres. When do we want justice? When do we want peace? We want it now.**

**Narrator:** Lyons was there to talk about David McAtee, but he was preoccupied that day — by the knowledge he had — of broken promises, ignored warnings, missed opportunities to avoid the very thing that brought him to this pulpit — that led to David McAtee lying in a coffin in front of him.

**Bishop Dennis Lyons: 2015, in the paper, it says, 'Police call for a reform of the police department in Louisville, Kentucky.' And here we are five years later with the same caption, 'Police call for reform of the police department.' We're singing the same songs. As long as we keep doing what we're doing, we'll keep getting what we getting.**

**Narrator:** Back in 2015, Lyons had watched with excitement as Louisville set out an ambitious plan to reform its police department and build a relationship with the citizens they protect and serve. The city was given grants, coaches, a roadmap — they were even chosen by the Obama Department of Justice as one of 15 cities to lead the rest of the nation in this policing reform effort.

**Narrator:** Louisville was going to be a city that reformed its own police department — and in the process — would teach the rest of the country how to do the same.

**Narrator:** Over the last year, the Kentucky Center for Investigative Reporting has partnered with the national news network, Newsy, to understand how it all went so wrong — how this Model City for policing reform instead became the face of a movement that says policing is beyond reform — and what that failure can teach us about how we move forward from this moment.

**Narrator:** Louisville is a city like so many across the country — where promises of policing reform fell victim to a violent crime surge, budget limitations, politics and a failure to hold officers accountable.

**Narrator:** I'm going to take you inside a police department that made big claims about its plans for reform — and inside the communities that were most harmed when they instead fell back on the same style of policing that created the need for reform in the first place.

**[DIG THEME MUSIC IN]**

**Narrator:** By the time LMPD officers killed Breonna Taylor in March 2020, kicking off massive demonstrations that May, there was so little trust between police and Black people in Louisville, so little communication, so few people who spanned both worlds.

**Narrator:** But there was at least one — David McAtee. And with his death, they burned one of their last remaining bridges to the ground.

**Narrator:** This is Dig Season 2: The Model City, an inside look at one police department's failure to reform itself. From the Kentucky Center for Investigative Reporting and Newsy.

**Female voice:** This season of Dig was reported by Eleanor Klibanoff of the Kentucky Center for Investigative Reporting and Carrie Cochran, Karen Rodriguez, Maia Rosenfeld and Maren Machles (MAIR-en MACK-less) with Newsy. It was produced by Eleanor Klibanoff. Edited by Kate Howard, Laura Ellis and Ellen Weiss. Data reporting by Rosie Cima (Chee-mah) and Mark Fahey (FAY-hee). Production assistance from Rip Rinehart and Chris Julin (JOO-lin). Field producing was by Zach Cusson (KOO-sahn), Mai Nolasco-Carranza (MY No-LASS-koe Cah-RAHN-zah), Tyler Franklin and Chelsae Ketchum (CHEL-see KETCH-um). Kojin Tashiro created our theme music, with Ryan Marsh. Fact checking by Kelvin Bias. Alex Cooper is our intern. Special thanks to WDRB News. We received support for this project from The Fund for Investigative Journalism.