

*The story in these pages, originally published online by The Intercept, is the result of a three-year investigation of the Chicago Police Department. Forty thousand copies have been printed and will be distributed across Chicago.*

# Code of Silence



*Harold Ickes Homes, 2008.* Photo: David Schalliol

## How the Chicago Police Department Covered Up for a Gang of Criminal Cops

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Print design by Bea Malsky  
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Ida B. Wells Homes Extension, 2007. Photo: David Schalliol

## PART ONE

### Operation Smoke and Mirrors

*Two young officers began to hear rumors of a drug gang operating within the Chicago Police Department. They were skeptical at first.*

**O**N MAY 31, the city of Chicago agreed to settle a whistleblower lawsuit brought by two police officers who allege they suffered retaliation for reporting and investigating criminal activity by fellow officers. The settlement, for \$2 million, was announced moments before the trial was to begin.

As the trial date approached, city lawyers had made a motion to exclude the words “code of silence” from the proceedings. Not only was the motion denied, but the judge ruled that Mayor Rahm Emanuel could be called to testify about what he meant when he used the term in a speech he delivered to the City Council last December, at the height of the political firestorm provoked by the police shooting of 17-year-old Laquan McDonald.

In that speech, Emanuel broke with the city’s long history of denying the existence of the code of silence. He spoke of “problems at the very heart of the policing profession,” and said: “This problem is sometimes referred to as the Thin Blue Line. Other times it’s referred to as the code of silence. It is the tendency to ignore, deny, or in some cases cover up the bad actions

of a colleague or colleagues.”

The prevailing narrative in the press was that the city settled in order to avoid the possibility that Mayor Emanuel would be compelled to testify. But the mayor’s testimony, had it come to pass, would have been unlikely to provide much illumination. By contrast, that of the plaintiffs, Shannon Spalding and Danny Echeverria, promised to be revelatory. In the words of Judge Gary Feinerman, they have a story to tell that “purports to show extraordinarily serious retaliatory misconduct by officers at nearly all levels of the CPD hierarchy.”

**W**HEN I FIRST MET Shannon Spalding in 2013, she was in despair. She had risked everything to bring to light corruption within the Chicago Police Department, she said, yet no one believed her.

In brief, Spalding recounted that she and her partner, Danny Echeverria, spent over five years working undercover on a joint FBI-CPD internal affairs investigation that uncovered a massive criminal enterprise within the department. A gang tactical team led by a sergeant named Ronald Watts operated a protection racket in public housing developments on Chicago’s South Side. In exchange for “a tax,” Watts and his team shielded drug dealers from interference by law enforcement and targeted their competition. Their operation went far beyond shaking down the occasional drug dealer. They were major players in the drug trade on the South Side.

The investigation had multiple targets. Beyond Watts, it was focused on members of his team and senior officials suspected of conspiring with him. It was also rumored both on the street and in the department that Watts was involved in the murders of two drug dealers who defied him.

When Spalding and Echeverria were on the verge of breaking the case open, the investigation was sabotaged by a high-ranking official who outed them as “rats.” Other CPD brass ordered officers under their command to retaliate against Spalding and Echeverria for violating the code of silence. Reprisals were especially harsh against Spalding, leaving her financially



devastated, suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, and stripped of the job she loves.

When we first spoke three years ago, Spalding's despair arose not from self-doubt — her conviction about the substance of her story was unshakeable — but from her awareness of the forces arrayed against her. She was oppressed by the knowledge that CPD brass had the power to impose upon the world their own version of reality and in the process portray her as delusional.

“I call it Operation Smoke and Mirrors,” she said at the time. “If four bosses in the department say it didn't happen, it didn't happen.”

While the term “code of silence” evokes something essential — the coerced silence of police officers who observe but do not report abuses by their fellow officers — it is, in some respects, a misnomer, a euphemism. The practices to which it refers are less a matter of silence than of tightly orchestrated lying and various means used to maintain narrative control.

Today, in the wake of the political upheaval in Chicago precipitated by the Laquan McDonald case, the CPD has lost control of the narrative. This creates space for Shannon Spalding's voice finally to be heard.

This article tells her story. It is based on extensive interviews with Spalding conducted over the last three years. It also draws on interviews with Echeverria and several others who figure in the case, and on the record generated in the course of pretrial discovery. Aided by notes she kept on a daily basis over the years, Spalding gives a richly detailed account of the code of silence not as a vague “culture” among the rank and file but as a set of institutional mechanisms central to the operation of the CPD.

To be clear at the outset: The police officials named as defendants in the whistleblower lawsuit — Chief Juan Rivera, Cmdr. James O'Grady, Chief Nick Roti, Sgt. Maurice Barnes, Lt. Robert Cesario, Sgt. Thomas Mills, and Cmdr. Joseph Salemme — deny the plaintiffs' allegations. In addition to citing their denials in the public record, efforts have been made to contact each of the defendants, as well as the other law enforcement officials who figure in the story. Each either did not respond, could not be located, or

declined to comment. The Chicago Police Department and the city's Department of Law both said they do not comment on active investigations or litigation. The defendants' depositions, affidavits, and sworn statements, in which they contest Spalding and Echeverria's version of events, are available in the online version of this piece at [The Intercept](#).

The counternarrative that emerges from the defendants' legal arguments is that Spalding and Echeverria played at best a marginal role in the Watts investigation, serving as little more than handlers for a confidential informant, and that they — particularly Spalding — were problem officers others did not want to work with. In a February 2015 press release about the case, the city stated that “Superintendent [Garry] McCarthy and the CPD have zero tolerance for retaliation against whistleblowers,” but “the city believes the claims of these particular plaintiffs are without merit.”

According to Spalding, the united front of the defendants against charges of retaliation under the code of silence is the ultimate expression of the code. If she is telling the truth, a group of high-ranking police officials are lying in concert and under oath.

**F**ROM THE START, Spalding's career was braided with that of Ronald Watts. When she joined the department in 1996, he was among the first officers she met.

## ■ Their operation went far beyond shaking down the occasional drug dealer. They were major players in the drug trade on the South Side.

# — If she is telling the truth, a group of high-ranking police officials are lying in concert and under oath.

Blond and Irish, Spalding was raised among the many police officers and firefighters who make their homes in Bridgeport. Watts grew up on the other side of the bridge in public housing. When he joined the department and came to the 2nd District in 1994, after a stint in the Army, he already knew the streets and the players.

Roughly 2 square miles, the 2nd District encompasses the heart of the old Black Belt, the African-American city within the city under segregation, which absorbed wave after wave of migrants from the South, then with the end of legal segregation, like a great swollen river, overflowed its banks and spilled into other South Side neighborhoods. Once the most densely populated part of the city, it was by the 1990s riddled with abandoned buildings and vacant lots. And it contained an extraordinary amount of public housing.

While some of that housing was built before

As a rookie, she was assigned to ride with him as part of her training. Over the years, they remained on friendly terms. And throughout their careers, they worked the same streets — the 2nd District on the South Side — during an era of turbulent change.

While both are native South Siders, they grew up in different worlds, on opposite sides of one of the starkest racial boundaries in the city: the bridge over the railroad tracks (and later the Dan Ryan Expressway) that separates the neighborhood of Bridgeport, long the stronghold of the Daley political dynasty, from the heart of the black South Side.

World War II as segregated housing for blacks — notably the Ida B. Wells Homes, a sprawling row-house development — most was constructed after the United States Supreme Court struck down racially restrictive covenants. Yet it conformed to traditional patterns of segregation. Confronted with opposition from white aldermen who didn't want public housing in their wards, the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) in the 1950s and 1960s had built developments in traditionally black areas of the South and West Sides.

The most extraordinary manifestation of this segregation was the so-called South State Street corridor, more than 2 continuous miles of public housing high-rises — the Robert Taylor Homes and Stateway Gardens — and several smaller mid-rise developments a few blocks farther north. By the 1990s, the corridor was said to be the single largest concentration of poverty in the nation.

That was the world Shannon Spalding entered when she came to the 2nd District as a rookie and was assigned to ride with Ronald Watts.

“It was culture shock for me,” she recalled recently. “I was in a world I didn't understand. I was lost. So I needed to learn. He schooled me.”

As they drove through the streets and alleys of the district, Watts shared his knowledge of gangs and drugs with her. Because the drug trade takes such distinctive forms in high-rise public housing, said Spalding, “housing police are a breed apart.” Watts, in her view, was one of the best.

The world they moved through was dominated by two gangs, the Gangster Disciples and the Black Disciples. Between them they controlled the drug trade in public housing. Each operated out of particular high-rises, often at the same development, which were identified accordingly as “GD” and “BD” buildings.

Night and day, an endless parade of customers was served by the young men in the open-air lobbies of the high-rises. At various locations around the perimeters of the buildings, solitary figures stood watch for 12-hour shifts “doing security.” Most were older men and women. Almost all were drug users who supported their habits by doing this work. Like street criers,



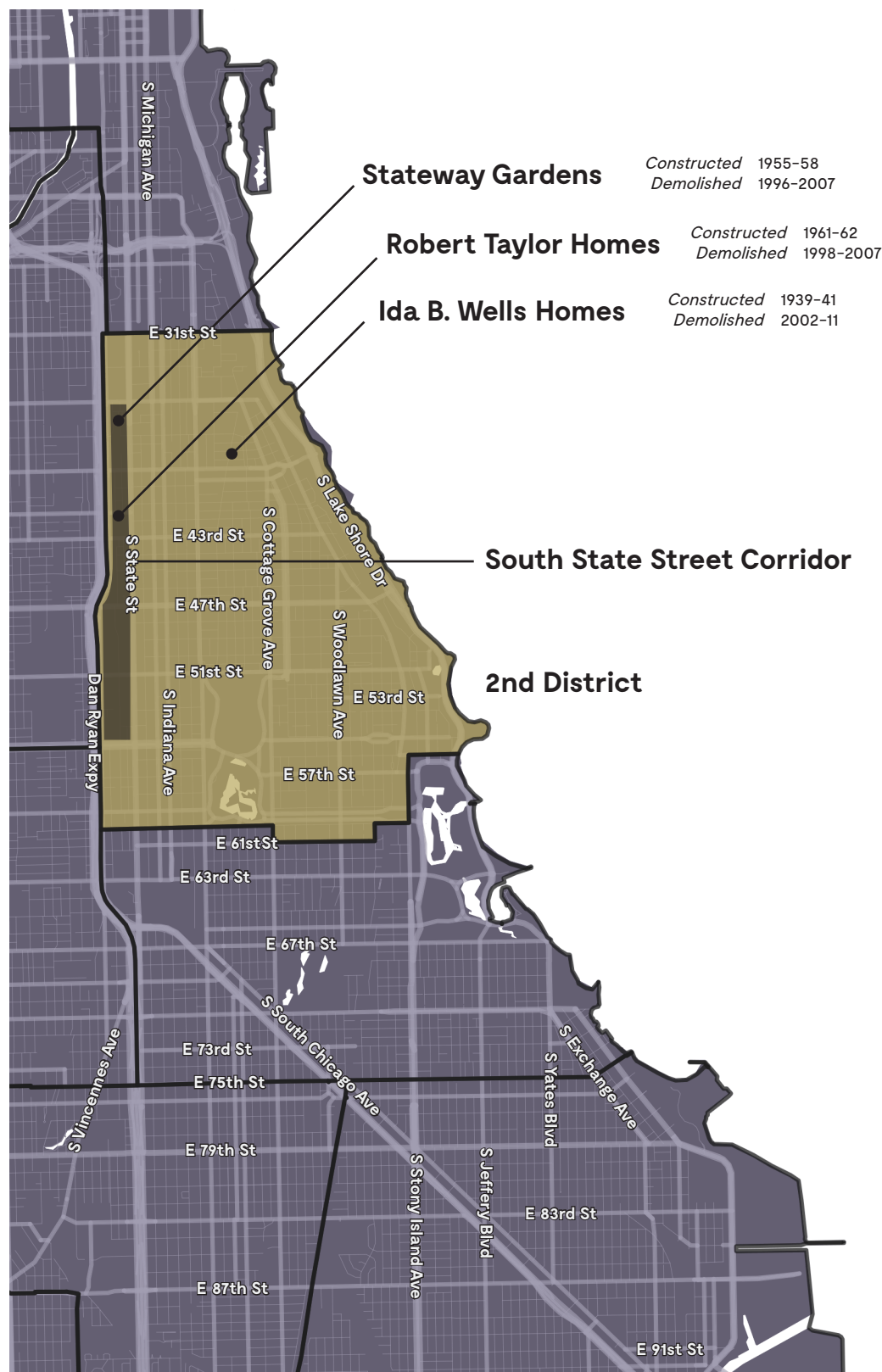
they sang out the names of the drugs sold in the particular building — “Dog Face!” “Titanic!” “USDA!” — and acted as lookouts. If a police car approached, they called out a warning — “Blue and white northbound on Federal” — and the message was relayed from voice to voice into the interior shadows of the drug bazaar.

An unintended byproduct of the design of the high-rise developments — they had been conceived, in the architectural idiom of the day, as “towers in the park” — was that you could see the police coming from a long way off. As a countermeasure, gang tactical officers, “the jump out boys,” often drove up on the buildings at high speeds, careening across the grounds and sidewalks, in an effort to grab the young men before they had a chance to flee up the stairs and disappear into an apartment or vacant unit. There were frequent arrests. Then, as the police drove away, the drug market would reopen for business.

Tellingly, both drug dealers and police refer to the cat-and-mouse maneuvers of the drug trade as “the game.” For one side, the object is to intercept, for the other, to evade. In the era before public housing on the South Side was demolished, the setting for this contest was derelict high-rises, housing impoverished families, through which wealth constantly circulated. In order to meet the never-ending demand, new “packages” of drugs were regularly delivered and stashed in secret locations, such as vacant units, utility closets, mailboxes, or garbage chutes. Money was harvested and hauled away. (The younger brother of a major drug dealer once described to me a vacant unit filled with grocery bags of cash — like tobacco curing in a shed.)

As they drove through the developments, Spalding recalled, Watts would point things out to her.

“Look,” he said one day. “See how they’re rolling the dumpsters out into the fire lane? They’re going to start shooting soon.” The dumpsters would function as barriers against drive-bys. Similarly, he warned her to be careful running into the lobbies at Stateway Gardens, because the young men had strategically placed railroad ties — delivered to the development for landscaping projects — to trip up the police.



The maps in this newsprint reflect CPD district boundaries as of 2012. ©Mapbox ©OpenStreetMap

Spalding eagerly absorbed Watts's instruction — "I learned something every day" — and enjoyed his company. "He was a likeable person, easy to be around," she said. "He sometimes joked with me — 'OK, Susie Homemaker, you can leave your apron at home today' — but he was always friendly and respectful."

There was one incident during this period, however, that gave her pause. They were on the grounds of Stateway Gardens. Watts identified a stolen car, and they took off in pursuit. The driver ditched the car and ran toward one of

high-rise alone. She was unpersuaded. There was no doubt in her mind she could have caught the suspect before he reached the building. The incident stayed with her and troubled her. "It didn't seem right."

On balance, though, she came away with high regard for Watts as "a good cop who got solid information and good results." And she was impressed by the respect he seemed to command on the street. Major gang leaders, who wouldn't engage with other officers, would talk to him.

**O**NCE SHE BEGAN to get her bearings, Spalding found herself powerfully drawn to the world of public housing. "I was like Christopher Columbus, discovering a new world. I loved going to work. It was so fascinating."

She developed an easy rapport with the residents, including gang members and drug dealers. Her nickname on the street, inevitably, was "Blondie."

"You're only as good as your word," she observed. "Trust isn't given. It's earned. The boys would say, 'Blondie was always fair.' I never took their money. I never put drugs on them. They were locked up all the time for things they didn't do. I earned their respect. So they would tell me things."

She used to say to them, "I've got two rules. Don't lie and don't run. If you do, all bets are off." She laughed. "I was running like a Kenyan back then. I could run 10 miles a day. I had the world's best Stairmaster — CHA high-rises."

"Everyone who has ever helped me in an investigation is an invisible person. They're prostitutes, drug dealers, the homeless, children. The people most cops don't see. Think about it. Who sees more of what's going on than the homeless and hookers?"

When the opportunity arose in 1997, Spalding joined the public housing south unit and began to work full time in the public housing developments on the South Side. It's hard to evoke how utterly abandoned these communities were at this point in their history. One measure is that in 1995 the federal government had seized



*From center left, Shannon Spalding and Danny Echeverria receive an award from police Superintendent Phil Cline in 2005.*

Photo: Chicago Police Department

the buildings. Spalding began to run after him. Watts called her back. "He really went off on me. It didn't seem to fit with the situation."

When they searched the car, they found a "trap" — a hidden compartment — full of money. She had no role in inventorying the money. Shaken, she tried to understand what had just happened. Watts explained that he was trying to protect her, that he didn't want her running into the



control of the CHA from the city. The Department of Housing and Urban Development official installed as director of the CHA, Joseph Shuldiner, had previously run the New York and Los Angeles housing authorities. In a recent interview, he observed that in addition to the degree of concentration and abandonment, Chicago's public housing differed from New York's in two critical respects. The tenant population was much poorer. And while the NYPD had continued to do vertical patrols, the CPD had long ago ceded any real control of public housing high-rises.

Despite the shadow play of enforcement, the developments were de facto vice zones where the sale of drugs was tolerated. Policing largely took the form of containment. The policy was to keep it in this box. Only when crime spilled out of the box did intervention become necessary.

Frustrated by the CPD's lack of responsiveness to the needs of its residents, the CHA had created its own police force in 1989. Spalding and other officers from CPD's public housing unit would regularly work on joint operations with the CHA police.

After several years of federal management, Richard M. Daley's administration regained control of the CHA in 1999 and launched the Plan for Transformation, its strategy for replacing concentrations of high-rise public housing with "mixed-income communities." The administration's rhetoric sang of inclusion, community renewal, and individual advancement. Mayor Daley was fond of saying, with characteristic fervor, "We're not only rebuilding neighborhoods, we're rebuilding souls." But the reality on the ground was land clearance: The objective was to demolish every public housing high-rise in the city and do so as rapidly as possible.

By 2000, as the plan began to gather momentum, Chicago's archipelago of public housing high-rises had taken on the aspect of a vast armada of ships loaded with boat people, just offshore, destined to be sunk one by one.

**A** MONG THE FIRST things the city did after regaining control of the CHA from the federal government

was disband the 270-member CHA police force and replace it with CPD officers. This required rapid expansion of the public housing unit. The city had a \$30 million federal grant for the purpose and ultimately hired 375 additional officers. Cmdr. Ernie Brown was appointed to head the unit, which was comprised of public housing south and public housing north, both under Brown's command.

When public housing south expanded, Ronald Watts, now a sergeant, joined the unit as a supervisor. He and Ernie Brown, according to Spalding, were said to be friends. Watts brought with him the core of the tactical team he had worked with in the 2nd District and would work with throughout his career: his partner, Kallatt Mohammed, along with Alvin Jones, Brian Bolton, and Bobby Gonzalez.

The expanded public housing unit brought together a large number of officers who had never worked together before, as well as some who had. "Cops are gossips," observed Spalding, and the unit was awash in rumors. There was talk about shake-downs of drug dealers and about big players paying off the police for protection. Some of the rumors focused on former CHA officers who made the cut and joined the unit. Others focused on Watts and his team. Spalding gave them little weight. Having worked with Watts, she was inclined to attribute the rumors to "professional envy."

Knowing what she knows now, she wonders, how did she not see then the corruption she would later help uncover?

"I truly didn't think it was going on." And to the extent it was going on, she assumed "the bosses" were actively investigating. Looking back now, she realizes she wasn't included in the big busts involving large amounts of drugs and money. "I may have had great numbers, but I wasn't with

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It wasn't hard to shut Spalding out of the action. With only a year and a half on the job, she had landed on a gang tactical team. She was still learning how things were done. And she was a woman. So she wasn't involved in searches of male suspects and wasn't in the locker room

where, she said, “the real planning and scheming goes on.”

Mickey Spaargaren, a friend from Bridgeport who joined the department when Spalding did and went to public housing south with her, had a different experience. Soon after coming to the unit, he observed patterns of corruption involving, among others, a former CHA police officer named Joe Seinitz, who had made the cut to join the CPD. Eventually, Spaargaren made contact with an FBI special agent named Ken Samuels to report on the corruption he was observing within the public housing unit.

Spaargaren was placed on Watts's team. In an affidavit he provided in Spalding and Echeverria's whistleblower case, he stated that on multiple occasions the team made large seizures of drugs and money that were never entered into the inventory log. Watts would tell other members of the team that they could leave, that he and Mohammed would do the inventories.

After one major seizure, Spaargaren checked the inventory log the following day and found it was empty “as if there had been no bust at all.”

He challenged Watts about this. Watts responded that he was “trading up” for information that would lead to bigger busts and major arrests.

Spaargaren was not persuaded.

“Are you accusing me of stealing, Mickey?” Watts yelled at him. “Well, fuck you. I'll put papers on you and make a case on you. The projects are dangerous. Be careful. You won't make it out alive.”

Sometime later, Watts told Spaargaren that his commanding officer, Lt. Jimmy Spratte, wanted to talk with him. When Spaargaren informed Spratte about the missing inventory, the lieutenant asked him whether he had gone to the internal affairs division. Spaargaren said he had not, that it was just a suspicion.

“You're accusing my sergeant and a fellow officer of stealing?” Spratte said. “Well, I don't believe you.” He told Spaargaren he should have immediately gone to a supervisor.

“You know what?” Spratte said, “I think you're the corrupt one, and that's why you didn't go to a supervisor.”

Spaargaren denied the accusation. Spratte became agitated.

“Pack your fucking bags, you need to get out of this unit. I'm moving you to another team tomorrow. And don't even think about going to IAD now,” he said. “I can call anyone and make your life miserable. You better keep your mouth shut. You don't want to lose your life over this. If you report a sergeant to IAD, how long do you think you will last?”

“Mickey was distraught,” recalled Spalding. He decided to take a leave of absence from the department and went to headquarters to execute the necessary paperwork. When Spratte heard Spaargaren had been down at headquarters, he assumed he had gone to internal affairs. They had a fierce exchange, which Spalding overheard.

“Spratte,” she said, “lost his mind.”

Before Spaargaren went to the FBI, Spalding had tried to dissuade him — she thought he was overreacting — but to no avail. Some months later, she was contacted by Special Agent Ken Samuels. They spoke on the phone several times. The main topic of conversation was Joe Seinitz. Samuels also mentioned in passing several other officers, Watts among them. She told him she

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hadn't witnessed any criminal activity within the unit.

"I just didn't see it then."

**N** EITHER DID I. Not at first.

During those years, I was a daily presence on South State Street. I had several roles. I was adviser to the Stateway Gardens resident council. I developed a program of "grassroots public works" designed to create alternatives for gang members. (Full disclosure: I was the source of the railroad ties for landscaping projects, repurposed by drug dealers, that Watts warned Spalding about.) And as a writer I documented conditions on the ground.

It took several years of immersion for me to begin to see the ways police were present — and absent — at Stateway. The residents educated me. Coming and going to and from their homes, they constantly navigated the open-air drug marketplaces "up under the buildings." Day after day, they saw the same dealers in the same positions conducting their business. They didn't have the moral luxury of demonizing them, for they knew many of them in other roles besides "gangbanger": as son or nephew, as boyfriend or teammate, as neighbor, as friend. Francine Washington, president of the Stateway resident council, used to invoke this knowledge by speaking of "our in-laws and our outlaws."

The nature of law enforcement at Stateway was mystifying. The police more often seemed a disruptive presence than a source of order. They didn't patrol the development in a conventional sense. Nor did they respond with any consistency to calls for service from residents. They mostly interacted with those in and around the drug markets. They would "hit the buildings" and make arrests. Yet somehow nothing ever changed.

The picture was further complicated by conscientious, hard-working officers one encountered, who were civil toward residents and seemed to be trying, however ambiguous their assignments, to do their jobs. It was puzzling why they were not more effective.

In every available forum, residents asked: Why

can't the police shut the drug trade down? Why can't this community have the same sort of law enforcement other neighborhoods have? Are the bored young men loitering in the lobbies such master criminals? Is the security system of drug addicts shouting out warnings so effective the police are unable to penetrate it?

An African-American officer in the public housing south unit once turned the question around and put it to me this way: "Think of the police as the working poor. Create a situation in which there's lots of money and drugs on the street in neighborhoods no one gives a fuck about. What do you think is going to happen?"



*Ida B. Wells Homes Extension, 2007.* Photo: David Schalliol

From my perspective on the ground, the larger forms of alleged corruption — the shakedowns and protection rackets, the drugs and money seized but never inventoried — were not visible. What was apparent were daily street-level abuses. Excessive force was more the norm than the exception. For some officers, it was sport. They would grade one another on the blows they inflicted. The language of racial invective — "nigger," "monkey," "hoodrat" — was routine; on oc-





*Harold Ickes Homes, 2007.* Photo: David Schalliol

casian, over the loudspeakers of police vehicles. There were officers who found it amusing to toy with those under their power — arranging a foot race of heroin addicts to determine who would go to jail, for example, or forcing a wom-

an they had searched on the street to walk home naked from the waist down. And then there was the corruption. Residents used to joke about the lobbies as “the policeman’s ATM machine.” Short on cash, officers could pop in, take money, drugs, or guns off the young men, and go on their way.

Some of the most revealing stories I heard alleged that the police preyed not only on drug dealers, but also on some of the most vulnerable members of the community. While the public housing unit was staffing up, the special operations section was deployed to South State Street. An elite unit that wasn’t tied to districts, SOS would later implode during a scandal involving shakedowns of drug dealers, robberies, and kidnappings. It was disbanded in 2007. In 1999, I interviewed a group of older women after an SOS team did a sweep of their building. They reported money and valued household objects missing. “They don’t just steal big money,” said one woman. “They steal little money.”

Similarly, residents told of certain officers who could be counted on to show up at the development on the first and 15th of the month — on check day — to take money out of the pockets of residents after they left the currency exchange.

During more than a decade of immersion in public housing, I was never in a position to observe police extort payoffs from drug dealers in exchange for protection. Yet I frequently witnessed or heard about police conduct that made manifest just how much space there was for abuse: A place where police officers can steal grocery money from the poorest of the poor and indulge in casual cruelty without fear of consequences is a place where anything is possible.

**I**N 2001, THE public housing south unit was hit by a major scandal. Two of its members — Sgt. William Patterson and Officer Daryl Smith — were caught in an FBI sting, ripping off what they believed to be a drug stash house. Their M.O. was to come in on their days off and generate phony search warrants. They would then hit a drug house, present the bogus warrant, and take everything they could lay their hands on. Having bought into the ruse, their victims would anxiously await the filing of



charges that never came.

The arrest of Patterson and Smith served to fortify Spalding's trust in the institution rather than undermining it. She saw it as proof that if officers engaged in serious misconduct, they would be disciplined. She also read it as confirmation that FBI investigations of Seinitz and Watts had yielded nothing.

In 2004, the public housing south unit was abruptly disbanded. Police officials explained that because a number of the CHA high-rises had been demolished by that time, a specialized unit was no longer necessary. The public housing that remained would be policed by the districts and a new roaming "targeted response" unit.

Spalding went to the 1st District, where she became partners with Danny Echeverria. He and Spalding had known each other in passing before they became partners. Riding together, they became close. Known on the street as Blondie and Danny Boy, they worked well together and enjoyed each other's company.

Today their mutual affection and loyalty are evident. They have been through a lot together. Like combat veterans or a long-married couple, each knows things about the other no one else does, and they have amassed narrative wealth to which they hold joint title. Listening to them recount, amid crossfire banter, their adventures and misadventures in public housing, it's clear they loved their jobs.

The 1st District was just north of the 2nd District and included the Harold Ickes Homes, a mid-rise public housing development that was one of the last to be emptied of residents and demolished. As other public housing communities were razed, its open-air drug markets became ever more active and congested.

Spalding and Echeverria attribute a large part of their effectiveness in working Ickes to the quality of their confidential informants, particularly a homeless man whom drug dealers sometimes used as a courier. He would ferry drugs and cash from place to place in a funky knapsack no one was disposed to search. They speak of him almost as a third partner.

Spalding christened him "Chewbacca" after

observing him jump out of a dumpster in which he had been foraging, "looking crazy" with long anarchic hair and a mouth containing braces but few teeth.

"Somebody," Echeverria observed of the braces, "must've loved him."

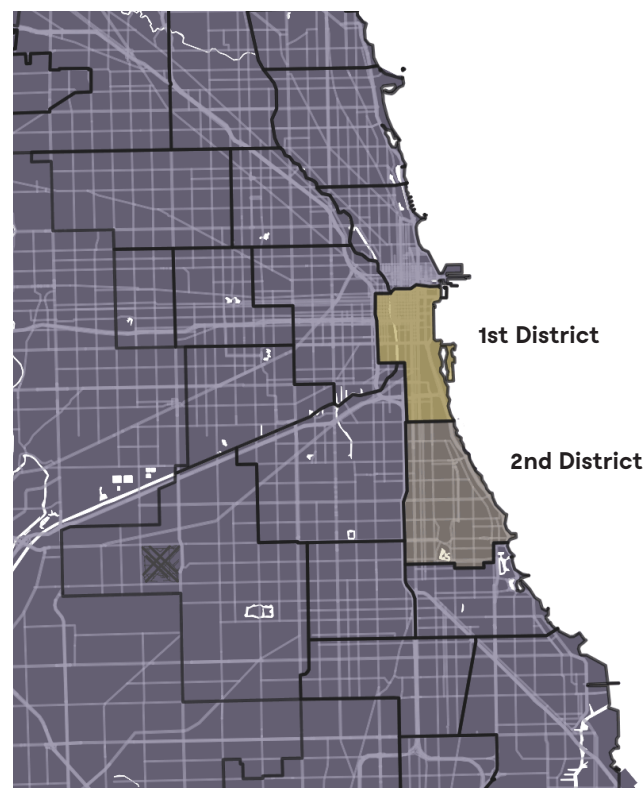
Chewbacca didn't want to be formally registered as a confidential informant with the city. He worked with Spalding and Echeverria on the strength of their personal relationships. "Chewbacca trusted us," said Spalding. Their relationship was one of reciprocity. They helped him out with his needs; he gave them information. They didn't pay him in the conventional sense. Rather, they cared for him, providing him with food and clothing, a sleeping bag and blankets, soap and towels (to shower at the Park District), mouthwash and toilet paper, a bus pass, and so on.

Chewbacca calls Echeverria by his street name, Danny Boy, but he has his own name for Spalding.

"I'm not going to call you Blondie like the rest of them," he told her early in their relationship. "I'm going to call you Smarty, because you're the brains of the operation."

**A**FTER INTELLIGENCE that Spalding and Echeverria gathered at Ickes provided the basis for a major drug bust, their "pat on the back," as Echeverria put it, was to be assigned to the narcotics division within the organized crime bureau.

Spalding worked undercover, making buys. Because she was known on the streets of the South Side, she worked the West Side. Echeverria did enforcement — surveillance, intelligence gathering, and debriefing of those arrested —



© Mapbox © OpenStreetMap

■ In every available forum, residents asked: Why can't the police shut the drug trade down?

working out of a satellite office maintained by the organized crime bureau in the 2nd District, which he shared with his immediate superior, Sgt. Roderick Watson. The point of such operations is to work up the food chain. If those at low levels cooperate and provide good information, prosecutors may agree to a reduced charge.

Watts had returned to the 2nd District after



*Ida B. Wells Homes, 2007.* Photo: David Schalliol

public housing south was disbanded, and his office was just down the hall from the organized crime office. According to Echeverria, Watts was on friendly terms with Watson. He would regularly stick his head in the office and inquire casually about what they were working on.

Prior to landing at the 2nd District, Echeverria hadn't known Watts personally, but he was aware of the rumors and had heard his name on the street. Drug dealers he nabbed in public housing would say things like "Can we buy you lunch?" or "Can we bond out here?" Echeverria was initially confused. "Shut up! They're not the crew," he recalled one of the young men saying. "They ain't like Watts."

As he did debriefings, Echeverria heard more and more references to Watts. This was particularly true of those arrested at the Ida B. Wells development. They would say things like "Why are you messing with me, when your man Watts is out there running his game?"

Initially, Echeverria told me, he didn't give much credence to these statements. Guys facing time can be inventive, he said, and they weren't providing him with much in the way of specifics. It was after he encountered Bernard Brown, a drug dealer whose picture was posted in the office as one of the top targets in the district, that he began to take the stories about Watts more seriously. Several members of Brown's crew had been arrested. Echeverria had been debriefing them, when he caught sight of Brown on the street and picked him up.

"He had this Afro with two pony tails," recalled Echeverria. "He looked like a big black Mickey Mouse."

Brown was sharp. He immediately recognized Echeverria and Spalding were not officers from the 2nd District because they had different radios.

"You're the indictment police, aren't you?" said Brown. Looking for some leverage to cut a deal for himself, he asked, "Do you guys know Watts?"

"That name rings out," replied Echeverria. "What can you tell me?"

"He's the motherfucker that be running the dope in the projects," replied Brown. "Are you sure you're the indictment police? Instead of fucking with us niggers, that's who you should go indict."

Brown provided enough concrete information that Echeverria could verify some of what he said with arrest reports and other police documents. He described a criminal enterprise in which Watts and several members of his team were systematically extorting money from drug dealers in public housing. The payoffs were known on the street as the "Watts tax." If a dealer paid the tax, his operation was protected from police interference. Watts, according to Brown, was protecting dealers allied with him, while



targeting the competition and redirecting seized drugs to his own dope lines.

“For me,” Echeverria recalled, “it was like Big Foot. I’ve always heard about the guy, but is he real? Then I go to the 2nd District, and there’s Big Foot standing in front of me. So I’m thinking, maybe there’s something to what I’ve been hearing.”

Among the things he was hearing were rumors that Watts had been involved in the murder of Wilbert Moore — aka Big Shorty — a drug dealer who operated out of the Ida B. Wells development. On January 19, 2006, Moore had been shot down outside a barber shop at 43rd and Cottage Grove.

For Echeverria, “pieces of the puzzle were beginning to come together.” A turning point came when they brought in another “player” who started talking about Watts. “You’re going to lock me up for four bags, when your guy Watts is moving the dope. They run that shit.”

“This guy put it together for me,” Echeverria recalled. The suspect also described an operation in which Watts was extorting money from drug dealers and running his own dope lines. “This was no pizza fund,” said Echeverria. For a popular drug line sold at multiple sites, according to the arrestee, the Watts tax could be as high as \$50,000 a week.

He also told essentially the same story about the fate of Big Shorty that Echeverria was hearing from other sources. In the course of interrogating him, Echeverria threw out various different names, including some phony ones, then asked him about Big Shorty.

“Why you asking me about a dead man?”

“What can you tell me?”

“Do you want the street version or the paper version? The street version is you all did it. Watts did it. The paper version is a beef inside the GDs.”

Echeverria was impressed. “You hear a lot of stuff,” he recalled, “guys just lying to live. Not this guy.”

He confronted a dilemma. How could he report what he was hearing without having the code of

silence enforced against him for ratting on another officer? “If I put pen to paper on this, my career will be over, not Watts’s.”

He called Spalding. “What the fuck do I do with this?” he asked.

“Go get a supervisor and make him do his job,” she replied.

**T**HE PLAN WAS to create a situation in which the supervisor would have to file a report. Procedure would be followed, the allegations would be reported, but it wouldn’t come back to Echeverria.

He requested that Sgt. Watson come to the room where the suspect was being held. He used a pretext. “He’s asking for a white shirt,” he told Watson. “He’s got something to say.”

Watson entered the room and went to undo the man’s handcuffs. While his back was turned, Echeverria made hand gestures to prompt him to talk about Watts. The man launched into a riff about Watts, reiterating to Watson what he had told Echeverria.

“We’re not trying to hear that shit,” said Watson.

Afterward, Echeverria asked Watson, “Hey, Sarge, how do you want me to handle that information he gave us in the report?”

“Make that shit a negative,” said Watson.

Echeverria entertained the possibility that Watson would follow procedure and open a confi-

■ **A place where police officers can steal grocery money from the poorest of the poor and indulge in casual cruelty without fear of consequences is a place where anything is possible.**



Sunrise Supermarket, near the Ida B. Wells Homes, 2010. Photo: David Schalliol

*Note: The police officials named as defendants in Shannon Spalding and Danny Echeverria's whistleblower lawsuit deny the plaintiffs' allegations. Each has been contacted for comment, as have other law enforcement officials who figure in the story, and each of them either did not respond or declined to comment, except where otherwise noted. The Chicago Police Department and the city's Department of Law both said they do not comment on active investigations or litigation. The FBI declined to comment.*

dential complaint register, or CR. Had he done so, Echeverria would have been contacted by investigators, but the call never came.

One day, while he was typing up a report, Echeverria recalled, he heard the name “Watts” and tuned into a conversation several detectives were having about Watts’s possible involvement in the killing of Big Shorty. He was struck by the tenor of the conversation. The detectives seemed resigned that the department would not pursue the matter.

Spalding had also heard details about the Big Shorty homicide from a CPD officer detailed to work with the Drug Enforcement Administra-

tion, with whom she occasionally exchanged information on an informal basis. The officer told her that the DEA had Big Shorty on a homicide charge. He had offered up Watts and was in the process of proffering when he was killed. (A 2005 report on an interview with Wilbert Moore conducted by the DEA, CPD, and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives, which recently became public in the case of a man who claims to have been framed by Watts and his team, establishes that Moore was cooperating with federal law enforcement and was providing information about Watts.)

Spalding didn’t know whether the stories about Watts were true — “I didn’t want them to be” — but she was losing her confidence that serious allegations of misconduct were being investigated by the department. “I’m getting more and more confused,” Spalding recalled feeling at the time. “How could these high officials not be doing their jobs? Did I take a different oath?”

While Spalding and Echeverria didn’t have definitive proof that Watts and members of his team had committed crimes, they were convinced there was sufficient evidence to warrant an investigation. And they felt obligated to do something.

They decided to go to the FBI. Once they provided their information, they assumed that would be the end of their involvement. Contacting the FBI, however, would prove to be less an end than a beginning. It would alter the trajectory of their lives and set in motion a sequence of events now moving inexorably toward a full public reckoning in Chicago with the nature and consequences of the code of silence within the CPD.



## Operation Brass Tax

*Chicago police officers Shannon Spalding and Danny Echeverria began investigating an elaborate criminal enterprise within the department that included extortion and possibly murder.*

**I**N THE SPRING of 2007, converging police scandals in Chicago threatened to engulf the Daley administration. Against the background of the long-running Jon Burge torture saga, stories of police criminality dominated the media. A major scandal involving the department's special operations section had erupted. The charges included not only robbing drug dealers but also stealing from ordinary citizens and attempted murder for hire. This was a particular embarrassment to Mayor Daley, for SOS had been strongly identified with his campaign against, as he often put it, "gangs, guns, and drugs."

The SOS scandal was a textbook example of systemic police abuse in several respects. It was a group phenomenon, not a matter of individual actors. The setting was the war on drugs, and the victims — in this instance, mostly Hispanic and often undocumented — were relatively marginalized and voiceless. Yet it was not the SOS case but a less typical incident that excited the most public attention.

On February 19, 2007, Anthony Abbate, an off-duty officer, had been drinking heavily at a tavern on the Northwest Side. When the bartender, Karolina Obrycka, refused to serve him more alcohol, he came behind the bar and punched and kicked her. Other customers intervened, and Abbate left. Obrycka called 911. She told the officers who responded that she had been attacked by a police officer and the incident had been recorded by the bar's security camera. Neither of these statements was included in the police report. In the days that followed, other officers put pressure on Obrycka and the bar owner not to file charges.



*Chewbacca, Spalding and Echeverria's longtime informant, looks out at the Chicago lakefront in 2014. Photo: Shannon Spalding*

When it became apparent that the Chicago Police Department was not going to take meaningful action against Abbate, Obrycka's attorney released the video recorded by the bar's security camera. The footage of the lumbering Abbate flailing away at the petite bartender went viral. Felony charges quickly followed and he was found guilty. Superintendent Phillip Cline was forced to retire. (He didn't help himself when he said, in an effort to convey the depths of his disapproval of Abbate, "If I could hit him with a baseball bat, I would.") Mayor Daley began the search for a new superintendent and an antidote to growing public concerns that his police department was out of control.

**T**HAT WAS THE moment, in the spring of 2007, that Chicago police officers Shannon Spalding and Danny Echeverria went to the FBI to pass on evidence of a scandal more extensive and damaging than those dominating the headlines: A CPD sergeant named Ronald Watts was running an elaborate criminal enterprise within the department, extorting a "tax" from drug dealers and targeting their rivals.

Spalding and Echeverria went on their day off





*Stateway Gardens, 2007.* Photo: David Schalliol

and took precautions to ensure that no one saw them enter the building. They were acutely aware that it was a cardinal sin to go outside the department to another agency, because, as Spalding put it, “that means the bosses can’t control the cover-up.”

They had hoped to meet with Ken Samuels, the FBI agent who had contacted Spalding years earlier at the suggestion of Mickey Spaargaren, an officer who had previously been on Watts’s team, but Samuels was not available. Instead, they met with Special Agent Patrick Smith.

Contrary to their expectation that they would have no further involvement with the FBI once they passed on their information, Spalding and

Echeverria found themselves in regular contact with Smith. He called frequently. And they occasionally met with him after work or on their days off.

During this period, Mayor Daley made two concurrent moves in response to demands for police reform. First, he appointed Jody Weis superintendent. Not only was Weis an outsider to the department, he had been a high-ranking official within the FBI, prompting speculation that his appointment was designed to head off federal intervention. Second, the CPD’s Office of Professional Standards, which had long been criticized for failing to vigorously investigate citizen complaints, was rebranded the Independent Police Review Authority, and Daley installed a

well-regarded police monitor from Los Angeles to run it. Whatever else might be said about these moves, they served to deflate the public debate about police accountability. The attention of the press soon moved elsewhere.

As Weis was entering into what would prove a difficult tenure as superintendent, Spalding and Echeverria were becoming increasingly uneasy about their interactions with the FBI. Smith had begun to ask them to break away to do work for him on the clock, which they refused to do. After more than a year of intermittent contact with Smith, they felt the need to make sure they were working within department guidelines. In August 2008, they met with Tina Skahill, the chief of the CPD's internal affairs division. Also present were Smith, Sgt. Tom Chester of the confidential section of internal affairs, who served as a liaison to the FBI, and Lt. Barbara West, commanding officer within internal affairs.

Spalding was gratified by Skahill's response. "She was wonderful."

"This is an important investigation," Spalding recalled her telling them. "It's been on our radar for a long time, but we haven't been able to accomplish anything. You two have the means to get results."

Skahill told Spalding and Echeverria they would be detailed to the FBI to work undercover on the investigation of Watts and his team. Spalding expressed concerns about possible damage to their careers were their identities revealed. Skahill assured them their identities would remain confidential. "You will be protected," she said.

Skahill emphasized the need for secrecy. "Don't tell anybody. This goes higher than the blue shirts. They have access to your files, your home information. You're working with people who are criminals with badges."

(In her deposition in Spalding and Echeverria's lawsuit, Skahill confirms that this meeting took place, but her account is considerably less detailed and she repeatedly responds to questions by saying that she does not recall.)

According to Spalding, the formal mechanism for assigning them to the FBI was to transfer them from the organized crime bureau to Unit

543 — "detached services" — a miscellaneous detail that would provide cover for their work on the Watts investigation. They were to report to Tom Chester. Only a handful of people within the department were to know of their assignment; among them, Debra Kirby, general counsel for the superintendent. Skahill would report directly to Superintendent Weis on the progress of the investigation.

**T**HE JOINT FBI-IAD investigation was christened "Operation Brass Tax." When Spalding and Echeverria were transferred to 543 and began reporting to the FBI, no explanation was given to the organized crime bureau. Officers are often detailed to "narcotic task forces" at the FBI, Spalding explained. So, if someone asked what they were working on, that was a sufficient response.

Soon after they came to the FBI, Spalding ran into Ken Samuels, the agent who had called her years earlier to inquire about Watts. She asked him what had become of the case he was working on then and was surprised to learn it was still open. She said Samuels expressed frustration. "The case never went anywhere," he said. "Whenever it started to go somewhere, it was like Watts was getting a heads-up. We haven't been able to get inside."

From the start, Spalding and Echeverria encountered a good deal of interagency distrust. On the first day they reported to the FBI, Spalding recalled, Special Agent Julie Anderson expressed surprise that Watts had become a sergeant. "They promoted him?" she said. "What the fuck is wrong with CPD?"

Anderson was also openly suspicious of internal affairs. "Your department will sabotage this investigation," she remarked. "As soon as it gets to white shirts, they'll shut it down."

For their part, the two street-smart narcotics cops quickly grew skeptical about the FBI's way of doing things. Among the first tasks they undertook was re-transcribing dozens of CDs of wiretaps in the Watts case, having found transcripts marked "not pertinent" that contained highly relevant material. In one instance, "lu" for "lieutenant" was mistaken for a first name.

■ **The two street-smart narcotics cops quickly grew skeptical about the FBI's way of doing things.**



■ **"Nobody lives to tell, when they get into it with Watts," said Chewbacca. "Watts leaves no witnesses."**

In another, "Obama" was mistaken for the president of the United States, when in fact it was a reference to the dope line at the Ida B. Wells Homes operated by a drug dealer named Kamane "Insane" Fears. His crew wore Obama T-shirts ("Yes We Can!") as a form of marketing rather than an expression of political allegiance. When challenged by the police — "What's with the shirts?" — they would respond that they were supporting the black presidential candidate from the South Side of Chicago.

On December 12, 2008, a few months after Spalding and Echeverria were formally assigned to the FBI, Fears was shot down at 37th and Calumet. The shooter or shooters pumped 17 rounds into his body. As in the case of Big Shorty, the word on the street was that the murder was the work of Watts.

Spalding and Echeverria expected to be at the FBI for six months, but the investigation moved painfully slowly. Sometimes this was due to circumstances beyond their control. In one instance, Watts had an accident and went on medical leave, but mostly the slow pace of the investigation was dictated by the FBI.

For example, Bernard Brown, then in prison, had been prepared to give a statement for more than a year before Smith told them to bring him in. When Smith finally interviewed him on August 7, 2009, Brown described in detail the structure of Watts's extortion operation. Smith showed him a photo array. He recognized several officers in Watts's crew, including one whom he said once proposed giving someone a pass on 60 bags of dope in exchange for an AK-47.

While the FBI had resources not readily available to the CPD — high-tech surveillance tools, funds to pay informants and use as bait in stings — Operation Brass Tax was built, according to Spalding, on the foundation of the street informants she and Echeverria had developed over the years.

Before they were detailed to the FBI, while they were in the narcotics division, they had gone looking for Chewbacca to see what he knew about Watts and his team. Although they had worked with him for years, they had never had occasion to talk with him about Watts. They had always been focused on the particular case they

were developing at the time. They couldn't find Chewbacca at any of his usual haunts. It turned out he was in prison.

He later told them that Watts had put a case on him. At one of the Wells buildings, Watts had approached him and pressed him for information about where some drugs were stashed. In the past, Chewbacca had cooperated with Watts, but this time he simply didn't know where the drugs were. When he wasn't forthcoming, Watts put someone else's package on him. Knowing he wouldn't be believed over Watts, he pleaded guilty. Chewbacca was often in and out of jail on relatively lightweight charges such as drinking in public, but the drug conviction resulted in a two-year sentence.

**A**FTER THEY BEGAN working with the FBI, Spalding and Echeverria finally spotted Chewbacca looking for food in a dumpster outside a White Castle at 35th and King. He had recently been released. He climbed into the backseat of their car. After they exchanged greetings and Chewbacca filled them in on his incarceration, they asked, "What's all this shit we've been hearing about Watts?" Chewbacca started talking and it was a long time before he stopped. He was an avalanche of information, confirming the scope of the protection racket Watts was running. They asked him how many times he had seen Watts paid off by drug dealers.

"Hundreds of times," Chewbacca replied. "For years. The boys call him Thirsty Bird. You have to pay taxes to sell dope. Watts ain't nothing nice. You come up missing if you go up against Watts. Look at Shorty. Look at Kamane."

Chewbacca said he had witnessed a confrontation that Big Shorty had with Watts in front of one of the Wells buildings in the days before he was murdered. Watts was pressing Big Shorty for more money. "We don't eat like that anymore," Shorty told Watts. "I'm done. I'm going to the feds on your ass."

A few days later, he was shot down. "Nobody lives to tell, when they get into it with Watts," said Chewbacca. "Watts leaves no witnesses."

On many occasions over the years, Chewbacca said, he had seen Watts take drugs off one person and put them on another. He imitated Watts passing drugs from hand to hand, saying, “Hmm, who’s going to ride the train today?” Growing up on South State Street, Chewbacca had known Watts before he joined the department. Watts was not, he said, a cop who went bad. He was a dope dealer who got the badge to further his criminal vocation.

Angry about being falsely arrested, Chewbacca was prepared to work with Spalding and Echeverria, including wearing a wire, to bring Watts down.

Another one of their informants, a drug dealer at the Harold Ickes Homes on South State Street, had traveled a similar path. Like Chewbacca, he had his own reasons for working to bring Watts down.

“He was really good,” said Spalding. “We could never get him.” They had built a relationship with the man. “He said, ‘You’re never gonna get me.’ But he helped us get everybody else.”

Watts came to the Ickes dealer to get paid off, Spalding recounted. There were drugs and guns on the table between them. “You’ve got to give me more than you’ve got on the table,” said Watts. The drug dealer misunderstood him. He thought Watts meant he wanted more drugs and guns when he wanted more money than the value of what was on the table. If he had understood, according to Spalding, he would have gone along. She quoted him as saying, “If that motherfucker told me I needed to give him another \$5,000, I would’ve given it to him.”

As a result of this communications glitch, Watts put someone else’s package on him and arrested him. He did two years and was particularly upset to have missed the birth of his son. When he came out of prison in the fall of 2009, he had a beef with Watts and was prepared to work with Spalding and Echeverria as a CI — a confidential informant. They developed a sting in which both he and Chewbacca played roles.

In February 2010, Chewbacca ran into Watts and described his role as a drug courier. “Nobody suspects me,” he told Watts. “I walk dope and money up and down State Street all the

time. I’m invisible.”

The plan, according to Spalding, was for Chewbacca, outfitted with a pen and baseball cap rigged with audio and visual surveillance devices, to go from 22nd and Michigan to a parking lot at 26th and State, where he would deliver a bag to their CI from Ickes, who would be parked in a covert FBI vehicle.

“Watts isn’t going to take the bait,” Spalding told the FBI agents. She predicted he would observe Chewbacca’s courier routine first. “I know him,” she said. “He’s careful and calculating. That’s why he’s still on the street.”



*Ida B. Wells Homes Extension, 2008.* Photo: David Schalliol

The scenario played out as she predicted. Watts and his partner, Kallatt Mohammed, observed the operation but didn’t pounce. “Hey, buddy, that was smooth,” Watts told Chewbacca later. “That was so smooth.”

Having hooked Watts, they orchestrated a sting on March 31, 2010, to reel him in. An agent gave Chewbacca the bag containing the money. Another agent was to follow Chewbacca to witness the transaction, so he wouldn’t have to



testify in court.

“Do you have eyes on the CI?” Spalding asked over the phone.

“I’m not going to be daisy-chained to his ass,” the agent replied. “I’m going to lunch.”

In the end, the agent didn’t see the transaction. Nor did Smith, who was observing from a nearby hotel room. He explained to Spalding that he had to go to the bathroom.

Watts, who was off duty, showed up in his police uniform driving an official vehicle. Mohammed

team to bail out Chewbacca with some of the money they had just ripped off.

Chewbacca was holding a 7-Eleven coffee mug that was wired. While being handcuffed, he managed to hold on to the mug. He protested fiercely that he didn’t want to go to jail. He ultimately prevailed. Watts gave Chewbacca \$770 and released him. The two officers then drove to Mohammed’s house where they presumably divided up the spoils.

Spalding and Echeverria were unnerved. FBI agents had repeatedly expressed suspicions that the CPD was subverting the investigation. Now, in light of the botched sting in which one FBI agent broke contact with the CI and the other took a bathroom break at a critical moment, they wondered: Was the FBI really this inept or was something else going on?



*Stateway Gardens, 2006.* Photo: David Schalliol

was with him. Chewbacca also observed another member of the team — Al Jones — in the course of the sting. Watts intercepted Chewbacca and took the bag. When he looked inside, he became agitated. “It’s empty. ... Oh, here it is.” Under clothes and other stuff, he found \$5,000. “I’m going to tell you what we’re going to do,” Watts told Chewbacca. “We’re going to have to arrest you for your own good. I’ll send in my guys to bail you out.”

In all likelihood, Spalding speculated, he would have dispatched other off-duty members of the

**T**WO YEARS AFTER the murder of Kamane Fears, purveyor of the Obama dope line, Spalding and Echeverria made a major advance in the investigation. The homicide remained unsolved, and under the pretext of investigating the case, they reached out to those who had been close to Fears. By pretending to be interested only in the murder, they hoped to make it easier for those they interviewed to talk freely about the operation of the drug trade and thereby gather intelligence about Watts’s criminal enterprise. The strategy worked. Over time, they developed a relationship with Fears’s former girlfriend.

Fears had been shot outside her home on the 3700 block of Calumet. She was a nursing student at Kennedy-King College. Spalding described her as “well-spoken, no attitude, she had made good choices.” Then she met Kamane Fears. “By the time she realized who he was, she was in love and pregnant.” The young woman, who could not be reached for comment, became a major source for Spalding and Echeverria. She gave them valuable information about the drug trade. She told them where the Obama dope line stash houses were and described the internal workings of the operation.

“She had been with Kamane dozens of times when he paid off Watts,” said Spalding. One day

she was walking a few steps behind Fears and Watts, when Watts patted Fears's pockets. "Easter's coming up," he said. "Where's my money? My kids need Easter baskets."

As the demolitions progressed at Ida B. Wells, Fears moved his operation to 37th and Indiana. Watts came around, seeking to tax him as he had at Wells and Ickes. Fears refused now that the high-rises were down and threatened to give Watts up to the feds. A few days later, he was killed.

Early that morning, Fears and his girlfriend were lying in bed together. He got a call on his phone. "I've got to go handle this," he told her. He went outside. She heard gunfire. She looked out the window and saw a hooded figure leaving the scene. The man turned and looked up at the window. She was afraid he saw her.

Knowing how Fears operated, she said, no one could get close to him unless he knew them. The shooter or shooters took two cellphones off his body, so it couldn't be determined who had made the call that set him up, and retrieved all the shell casings.

Having built their relationship with Fears's girlfriend on the pretext they were working the homicide, Spalding and Echeverria had, in fact, with her help developed significant new information about the murder. So they took her to the cold case unit, in the hope detectives there would pursue the leads they had generated. The sergeant they dealt with was not welcoming.

Spalding and Echeverria were not in the room when the sergeant interviewed Fears's girlfriend. After they emerged, the sergeant asked the woman, gesturing toward Spalding and Echeverria, "What did those two do that my guys couldn't do in two years?"

"It's very simple," she replied. "They did something none of your officers did. They knocked on my door and asked me."

**D**URING THIS PERIOD, Spalding and Echeverria also talked with Kamane's mother and his brother Jerome, aka Monk, who had assumed leadership of the Obama drug operation. The relationships

they developed were such that when the mother died, the family invited them to the wake.

One day, as they drove past 37th and Indiana, Monk flagged them down. He leaned in Echeverria's window, and the three talked for about 45 minutes. Moments after they parted, Spalding received a call from a DEA agent she knew. They set up a meeting in a nearby alley.

"How do you know Monk?" the agent asked. "We're trying to get a wire up on him. We just saw him flag you down and talk with you." With a touch of undisguised pride (at least in the retelling), she asked, "Do you want his cellphone number?" She made a phone call.

"Hey, Monk," she said, "I just wanted to make sure this is still your number. ... Thanks."

When Watts's name came up in the course of the conversation, she recalled, the DEA agent was outraged to learn he was still on the force and had been promoted to sergeant. "Watts is still around, as corrupt as he is? We were looking into him 10 years ago. I can't believe your fucking department. I can't believe they didn't do anything about it."

**B**Y THE SUMMER of 2010, Spalding and Echeverria had, in effect, been orphaned by both agencies involved in the joint investigation. On the FBI side, the behavior of Special Agent Patrick Smith had become increasingly erratic. It turned out he had never done the paperwork necessary to properly establish them at the FBI, and they lost access to the office and car they had been using.

On the CPD side, Tina Skahill, the chief of internal affairs who had assigned them to Operation Brass Tax, had been moved to another command position. They lost their key protector. "Fast forward," said Spalding. "I believe if Skahill had stayed in place, none of what happened would have happened. She would have protected us."

Skahill was replaced by Chief Juan Rivera. Well-liked within the department — as one high-ranking official put it to me, the rank and file "know he cares about cops" — Rivera had a longstanding relationship to the Watts investi-



gation. He had been a sergeant in internal affairs when it was initiated. Now, years later, he was back as chief, and the case, still open, was once again his responsibility.

Looking back, Spalding now believes the investigation was designed to fail. Watts was known to be at the center of a far-flung criminal enterprise with multiple co-conspirators. Yet the investigation was reduced to “two cops, one car, one radio ... and good luck.” Nonetheless, the two undercover officers continued to work the case as best they could.

Then the bottom fell out. The first sign that something was wrong came in August 2010 when they submitted paperwork to Cmdr. James O’Grady of the narcotics division, seeking approval of their Ickes informant as a CI. Word came back from a sergeant they dealt with in narcotics that O’Grady had refused to approve the application and had instructed him, “You are not to work with those IAD rats.”

Realizing their cover had been blown, Spalding and Echeverria immediately sought out Rivera. He told them he had informed Deputy Superintendent Ernie Brown that they were working on the Watts investigation. “Brown,” said Rivera, “must have told everyone.”

Today Spalding recalls this as the instant when everything changed. She immediately grasped the implications. “I knew I was doomed.” She remembers every detail. The smell of coffee brewing in the IAD office. The perspiration soaking her shirt. The sensation of free fall.

“What the fuck did you do that for?” she challenged Rivera.

“I thought it would be helpful for you,” he said.

“What do you mean?” she shot back. “Telling someone who’s friends with Watts?”

“I think I might have fucked up,” said Rivera.

My life is in this man’s hands, she recalls thinking, and he is telling me he fucked up. They were, she knew, utterly exposed.

“You guys are in grave danger,” Rivera said, “and I can’t protect you. So for now you have to be extremely careful. Fly completely under the radar.”

Rivera described a meeting of bosses at which O’Grady referred to them as “rats” and Nick Roti, the chief of the organized crime bureau, said he wouldn’t allow them to work in any unit under him. Although O’Grady was their commander, they had never met him. “He wouldn’t know us if he saw us on the street,” Spalding said. Yet he was, according to Rivera, ordering officers under his command to retaliate against them. “God help them if they ever need help on the street,” Rivera quoted their commander as saying. “It ain’t coming.”

**O**’GRADY AND ROTI deny making the utterances Spalding alleges. Their denials are sweeping and categorical. In statements in the whistleblower case, each made the same sworn declaration: “I never made any statements to or about Plaintiffs or took any action against or relating to Plaintiffs based on any reports they may have made to the FBI of alleged criminal misconduct or corruption by Watts, Mohammed, or any other Chicago police officer.” The Chicago Police Department and the FBI both declined to comment. All the law enforcement officers who are named in this article either declined to comment or did not respond to requests for comment.

Rivera in his deposition denied talking with Ernie Brown about the involvement of Spalding and Echeverria in Operation Brass Tax. He denied ever talking with O’Grady about the two officers. He denied playing any role in outing them. And he denied that the conversation Spalding describes with great emotion as a pivotal traumatic experience — the moment she realized how exposed they were — ever took place.

At the same time, Rivera acknowledged that he had “numerous” conversations with Spalding and Echeverria and they talked “almost every other day.” Despite his sensitive position, he was, according to Spalding, an expansive talker. It seemed to give him pleasure to instruct her and Echeverria about how things really worked within the department.

“Rivera,” Spalding said, “told us stories about everybody.”

## House of Cards

*Top Chicago police officials carried out a campaign of retaliation against two officers investigating a criminal gang within the department.*

**O**N FEBRUARY 22, 2011, Rahm Emanuel was elected mayor of Chicago, bringing to an end the 22-year reign of Mayor Daley the Second. His election drew national attention and insistent speculation that he saw the role of mayor as a stepping stone to the White House, something he repeatedly denied. Being mayor of Chicago, he insisted, was his dream job.

No Emanuel appointment was more closely watched than his choice of a new superintendent for the Chicago Police Department. While the integrity of Mayor Daley's Superintendent Jody Weis was never questioned, he had often seemed politically tone deaf and had proved unable to translate his outsider status into effective power within the department.

Emanuel's choice — Garry McCarthy, the police director of Newark, New Jersey — was also an outsider, but he was described as “a cop's cop.” McCarthy had earlier served under William Bratton in New York, where he built his reputation managing CompStat, the data-driven management tool the NYPD had developed for holding commanders accountable for crime in their districts.

For high-ranking police officials, transitions in department leadership are “times of upheaval,” as one put it to me. This is especially true when the new superintendent comes from outside and is an unknown quantity. Among the things known about McCarthy that might have been expected to stir anxieties were his strong identification with CompStat and his intention to



*Harold Ickes Homes, 2009.* Photo: David Schalliol

move swiftly to make good on Emanuel's campaign pledge to put an additional 1,000 officers on the street.

**O**PERATING LARGELY on their own without meaningful support from either the FBI or CPD's internal affairs division, Chicago police officers Shannon Spalding and Danny Echeverria carried on as best they could with their investigation into the far-flung criminal enterprise allegedly run by Sgt. Ronald Watts and his gang tactical team. According to Spalding and Echeverria, the character of their jobs — the very air through which they moved — had fundamentally changed after they were outed by the head of internal affairs, Chief Juan Rivera. Exposed and isolated, now known as “IAD rats,” they knew better than



anyone what Watts and Co. were capable of. Yet they continued — “two officers, one car, one radio” — to work the case. Their efforts paid off.

One day, as they drove past the apartment where Monk Fears and his girlfriend lived, they noticed his car was smashed up. The girlfriend told them the following story: She and their baby were in the car with Monk, who was in the process of re-upping, distributing packages, and collecting money — so there was lots of dope and cash in the car. Watts and his team came after them. Watts and his partner Mohammed were in an unmarked car with city plates, and Brian Bolton and Bobby Gonzales, two other members of the team, were in a CPD Tahoe. A wild car chase ensued on the Dan Ryan Expressway, Lake Shore Drive, and ultimately into the Hyde Park neighborhood, where Monk lost control of the car and crashed in a park. He fled on foot.



*Harold Ickes Homes, 2010.* Photo: David Schalliol

Watts and his team seized the dope and cash. They didn't even check on the condition of the woman and infant who remained in the car.

Monk's girlfriend noticed that a man she recognized, who worked the Obama dope line, was handcuffed in the backseat of the Tahoe. Spal-

ding and Echeverria were familiar with this individual. They tracked him down. He described how he had banged around in the backseat of the Tahoe because he was handcuffed and couldn't brace himself. On 35th Street near U.S. Cellular Field, he said, the officers had taken the cuffs off and released him.

“You didn't see nothing,” they told him.

Monk was shaken by the car chase. “They're out of control,” he told Spalding and Echeverria. “I don't know where it's going to end.” Referring to the fate of his brother, Kamane Fears, he said he was worried he was in line for “the Watts Special.”

The accelerating pace of public-housing demolitions, it appeared, was destabilizing things not only for the gangs but also for corrupt police who fed on the drug trade. As the buildings came down, the “careful and calculating” Watts, as Spalding once described him, and his team were becoming increasingly reckless.

Several weeks later, Monk's girlfriend let Spalding and Echeverria know that he had been locked up. They arranged to talk with him via her cellphone. When Monk called, Spalding and Echeverria spelled out the offer the feds were prepared to make in exchange for his cooperation in the Watts investigation. Monk agreed to proffer and to wear a wire in his dealings with Watts. This was, said Spalding, “a huge break in the case.” They made plans to pick up Monk at the facility where he was incarcerated at 8 a.m. on May 4 and bring him to the FBI. (Monk Fears and his girlfriend could not be reached for comment.)

On the afternoon of May 3, Spalding and Echeverria received a call from Tom Chester, the IAD liaison to the FBI. He told them there had been a meeting at which it was decided to take them off the investigation. They rushed to CPD headquarters to talk with Tina Skahill, the former chief of internal affairs. They told her Monk was prepared to proffer, but they were being taken off the investigation. Skahill was aghast. “This cannot happen,” she said. “The superintendent is involved in this investigation.”

Spalding told Skahill that there was about to be a meeting of senior officials, including Rivera

and Cmdr. James O'Grady, regarding their fate. Skahill went down to the meeting. She apparently was unable to gain access, because she soon returned and said, "I'll talk with Juan."

Later that afternoon, Spalding and Echeverria received voicemail messages from Deputy Superintendent James Jackson, informing them that they were no longer assigned to the FBI and were being reassigned to the CPD. He instructed them to report in uniform to the detached services unit on May 4 at the beginning of their shift.

Juan Rivera was their principal source of information about what had happened. Here is what they say he told them:

A supervisor in the detached services unit had asked Echeverria what he and Spalding were working on. As instructed by Rivera, he referred her to Deputy Superintendent Debra Kirby. Deputy Superintendent Beatrice Cuello called Kirby to confirm that Spalding and Echeverria were working on an undercover investigation and the paperwork was in place. Kirby denied knowing who Spalding and Echeverria were, much less knowing they were involved in an undercover investigation.

On the basis of Kirby's denials, Cuello and Jackson concluded Spalding and Echeverria were lying when they said they were engaged in an internal investigation. According to Rivera, Kirby admitted to him she had screwed up by not clarifying the situation. He quoted her as saying, "I'm supposed to be over this investigation. I'm not going to clear this up now. Too many bosses look bad. How could we not know what's going on for 2 1/2 years?"

However implausible this account — Why couldn't Rivera, as chief of internal affairs, definitively resolve the matter? — there was no doubt about the outcome. On May 4, Spalding and Echeverria did not go to pick up Monk to take him to the FBI but headed to the detached services unit. En route, they were instructed to go instead to the police academy for a one-day training.

**W**HEN THEY ARRIVED, a sergeant addressed them sharply, "You're not here for a one-day class," he said. To Spalding, he said, "You're going to the 3rd District on midnights." And to Echeverria, "You're going to 15 on midnights. And don't act like you don't know what's going on."

They were taken aback by his punitive tone. Echeverria had been talking on his cellphone as they entered the building. The sergeant reprimanded him for doing so. Echeverria handed him the phone. Rivera was on the other end of the line.

"Yes, Chief," they overheard him say. "Sorry, Chief. ... Yes, Chief."

The sergeant told Rivera, among other things, that he had received an email from Jackson about Spalding and Echeverria. After his conversation with Rivera, the sergeant handed the phone back to Echeverria.

"I apologize," he said. "It seems you two really don't know what's going on. And neither does the chief."

Spalding later asked Rivera whether he had seen Jackson's email. He said he had, but he didn't share its content. "It would just upset you," he said. During their lunch hour, they rushed from the academy to headquarters and told Skahill that they were going to be put on the street.

"What? They can't do that," Skahill said. "That could get you killed."

Skahill sent a directive to the academy that the two officers were not, under any circumstances, to be assigned to patrol. They spent the day in a small room at the academy without phones, computers, or radios. They would remain there for most of the next three weeks. At the moment they were poised to bring the Watts investigation to a successful conclusion, they were, as Spalding put it, "placed under house arrest."

They were given no meaningful work to do at the academy. It was suggested they sit in on classes for the new recruits. And at one point, they were directed to act as "in-car camera instructors," despite never having used an in-car camera.

**■ "I'm supposed to be over this investigation. I'm not going to clear this up now. Too many bosses look bad."**



**■ Had the investigation been derailed not because of crossed lines of communication among the bosses but because of where it was leading?**

On May 16, 2011, while they were at the academy, Rahm Emanuel was sworn in as mayor of Chicago, and Garry McCarthy became police superintendent. Within 10 days, McCarthy acted on Emanuel's campaign pledge and re-assigned the first 500 officers of the promised 1,000 to beats in the districts.

Spalding and Echeverria were not among them. Skahill had them reassigned to the inspections division, Unit 126, under her command, where once again they sat idle at empty desks. "I have nothing for you to do," Skahill said apologetically.

Their supervisor, Lt. Deborah Pascua, was openly hostile toward them. Echeverria in his deposition testified that she called them "rat motherfuckers" and spread the word within the unit that they should be shunned. "I'm a lawyer and know how to put a case together," he quoted her as saying. "I'm gonna work on getting them fucking launched."

As dispiriting for Spalding and Echeverria as the abuse was the denial of work. When they weren't sitting at their desks with nothing to do, they were reduced to chauffeuring Pascua around, often on her personal errands. They started getting written up "for this and that" — even, in one instance, Spalding said, on her day off. "They're trying," Rivera told them, "to build a false file on you."

On September 13, 2011, Spalding and Echeverria met with Cmdr. Adrienne Stanley, their commanding officer, and told her of the retaliation and hostile work environment. "I don't want to hear this," Stanley said. "I don't want to know."

She refused their request that she initiate a "complaint register" investigation, or CR. The commanding officer having refused to intervene, Pascua's campaign against them continued and was joined by others, according to Spalding.

Increasingly concerned about Spalding and Echeverria, Skahill ordered them to discuss the retaliation with Rivera. (Skahill's memory of these events, as reflected in her deposition, is hazy. In response to questions, she repeatedly replied that she could not recall.)

When Spalding and Echeverria asked Rivera to initiate a CR investigation, he refused. Echeverria challenged him. "Since no one at CPD will do anything, we need to take this to an outside agency," he said, referring to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. The normally easygoing Rivera responded angrily.

"Look, Dan, right now the entire department is against you and Shannon," he said. "I'm the only one on your side. If you file a complaint, you will piss me off, and believe me, the last thing you two want to do is piss me off. Then you'll have no one helping you. Leave it alone."

Frustrated by Rivera's refusal to initiate a CR investigation, Spalding and Echeverria sought the advice of Pete Koconis, a former internal affairs officer who had recently retired after 38 years in the department, 17 of them in IAD. Koconis talked with them repeatedly and at length in an effort to assess their credibility.

"The reason being," he said of his conversations with Spalding in his deposition in her case, "I wanted to hear her tell me this story more than once and as many times as I could because as a policeman and an investigator, if somebody is lying, they're going to get tripped up. And I found she was straight on line or on point every time I talked to her."

Having served on the team that managed the 1999 transition in public housing from the Chicago Housing Authority police to the CPD, Koconis had independent knowledge of Watts and his team. It was during this assignment that he first became aware of criminal activity by police working in public housing. The information gathered by the transition team was turned over to the FBI. Although he was not directly involved, Koconis was aware of the ongoing investigation of Watts and his team — an investigation that Juan Rivera assumed responsibility for when he joined the confidential section of IAD in 2005. Watts and Mohammed "were not ... the only targets" of the investigation, Koconis stated in an affidavit in another case. "There were multiple members of Watts's tactical team that were also targets."

Koconis testified in his deposition that he reached out to Beatrice Cuello to get her assessment of Spalding and Echeverria: "Yeah, I know

them,” she replied. “And I find them to be good officers. I don’t know why everybody is messing with them.” She reported that there had been a meeting at which “Roti and O’Grady said that they were IAD rats and that they were not welcome back in narcotics section.”

Having concluded Spalding was telling the truth, Koconis agreed to help. Among other things, he told me, he arranged to meet with the new superintendent. He warned McCarthy of several undetonated scandals within the department, including the Watts case, and urged him to get out ahead of them. He also told him of the retaliation against the two officers who had developed the case against Watts. McCarthy listened, he said, and thanked him for the information.

Koconis confirmed for Spalding and Echeverria that CPD regulations require a supervisor who is informed of misconduct to initiate a CR investigation and forward it to internal affairs. According to Spalding and Echeverria, they repeatedly asked Rivera to initiate CR investigations for various acts of retaliation. Yet he refused. They ultimately named him as a defendant in their lawsuit not for retaliating against them but for failing to protect them from retaliation.

Rivera in his deposition denied that Spalding and Echeverria ever formally requested that he initiate a CR investigation. Such a request would normally take the form of a “to/from” memo, he testified, and he received no such document from either officer. (The sworn statements and depositions of Rivera and the other defendants, in which they contest Spalding and Echeverria’s version of events, are available with the online version of this piece at *The Intercept*.)

I asked Spalding why, in her view, Rivera had not initiated the CR investigations they requested. He had, she said, “made too many deals,” thereby neutralizing his ability to act. Attributing her understanding of this dynamic largely to conversations with Rivera himself — conversations he denies ever occurred — she described him as ensnared in a web of mutual blackmail in which “bosses” have leverage over one another by virtue of their shared knowledge of the “deals” they have made. She gave an example: I’ll make this CR against your guy go away if you’ll promote



*Stateway Gardens, 2006.* Photo: David Schalliol

my guy within your unit. The code of silence and “clout” are thus entwined. Rivera, she recalled, once remarked to her that the bosses “trade CRs for favors like baseball cards.”

**I**N OCTOBER 2011, Spalding and Echeverria got a call from Rivera informing them they were to return to the FBI and brief a new agent about the Watts case. Shortly afterward, Echeverria was driving with Sgt. Al Boehmer, a liaison between the CPD and FBI. They were talking about the renewed Watts investigation.

“None of this was necessary,” Echeverria said. “We had Monk.”

“The department couldn’t take that risk,” Boehmer told him. “We couldn’t risk having Monk go on the stand and talk about Watts killing his brother.”

Echeverria was stunned. Five months after their removal from Operation Brass Tax, had Boeh-





*Ida B. Wells Homes, 2006.* Photo: David Schalliol

mer just told him what had really happened? Had the investigation been derailed not because of crossed lines of communication among the bosses but because of where it was leading?

Boehmer's remark was the first in a series of shocks. Spalding and Echeverria learned from Chewbacca, as the three of them drove to the FBI, that in their absence Special Agent Patrick Smith — Spalding and Echeverria's primary FBI contact — had been deploying him on questionable assignments such as buying prescription drugs and Viagra on the street. He also said Smith had not paid him for his work.

When they arrived at the FBI, they reported what Chewbacca had told them. Agents talked with Chewbacca for several hours. Spalding and Echeverria were not in the room. Chewbacca was directed not to talk with them about Smith, and they didn't probe. They didn't want to put him in an awkward position.

Several days later, they spoke with Rivera at CPD headquarters. The conversation took place in the hallway at internal affairs. Rivera informed them that the FBI had initiated an investigation and "Washington" was coming to interview them.

"We're going to have to sit down and figure out what we're going to say," he told them. "We have to be on the same page."

Spalding replied that she did not see any need for a meeting: "I'm going to tell the truth."

"You can't ever tell the truth," said Rivera heatedly. "You'll get all of us fired. I just went through a federal trial with all the SOS shit. I can't withstand another trial."

Spalding understood this to be a reference to the fact that Rivera, as head of IAD, had failed to root out the criminal activities of the special operations section — not only robbing drug dealers but also ordinary citizens, and attempted murder for hire. How could he explain leaving Watts and his team on the street for a decade?

"The chief of internal affairs is the most powerful person in the Chicago Police Department," Spalding observed. "They report only to the superintendent." Yet because of Rivera's failure to exercise that power, "it shifted to the corrupt officers." Watts understood this, she said. She



heard him on more than one occasion say in the presence of other officers at the station house, "You think the feds are ever going to come against me? If they come after me, I'm going to sing a song so loud it'll crumble the department and bring all the bosses down with me." This was not idle talk, she said. He was sending a message.

In the end, they weren't interviewed. Smith resigned. Because the investigation was still an administrative matter, his resignation effectively ended it. That, at any rate, is what Rivera told them.

They were now "back on the case," as Spalding put it, "but at a distance." They didn't work out of the FBI and were on "a need-to-know basis." The FBI seemed less concerned with resuscitating the investigation than with damage control. Spalding and Echeverria were told that because of Smith's shoddy work, the bureau couldn't use any of the intelligence they developed over the years they worked on the case. The concern, as they understood it, was not that all the evidence was tainted as a legal matter, but rather that if it came out that Smith was a rogue agent, every other case he had worked on would be open to challenge.

The plan was to start over and build a new case. It would be a very different sort of case from the one they had spent years developing. The broad investigation of police corruption involving Watts's entire team and implicating various bosses now contracted down to two targets: Watts and Mohammed.

On November 21, 2011, they conducted a sting. It was a reprise of the earlier scenario. Chewbacca tipped off Watts that he would be transporting drug proceeds in his knapsack. He told him he was to pick up a bag from a car at a McDonald's at 26th and King and walk it to another car on 29th Street.

At the appointed time, an undercover officer drove into the McDonald's parking lot and handed a black bag to Chewbacca. The bag contained \$5,200 and a tracking device. The plan, according to Spalding, was that Chewbacca would deposit the bag in the car at 29th and leave the door open. When he arrived at the spot, he couldn't gain access to the car. The FBI hadn't unlocked it. As he was trying to get into

the car, Mohammed drove up and took the bag from him.

"Get the fuck out of here," Mohammed said.

"I don't get no money?" protested Chewbacca.

Mohammed told him to meet him later at 30th and King.

Chewbacca then called Watts.

"C'mon now," he said, "I did everything right, man."

Watts revised the plan: They would meet at 22nd and Canal. When Watts showed up some 40 minutes later, Chewbacca expressed relief.

"No, never doubt, brother," Watts said. "Who always takes care of you?"

"You do, Watts."

"There's five large, brother." Watts handed Chewbacca some money, then drove away.

A few minutes later, Chewbacca gave agents \$400. They searched him but found no other money on him. Perhaps the habit of skimming went so deep that Watts couldn't help himself from shorting Chewbacca.

**D**URING THIS PERIOD, Spalding and Echeverria continued to report to Rivera. They spoke with him frequently.

"You're absolutely the most dangerous person to the department right now," Rivera told Spalding, "because you know too much, and you talk too much."

But, she thought to herself, I'm the only one around here who doesn't talk.

The hostility from the bosses, Rivera explained, "isn't about Watts. They're worried you're going to tumble their houses of cards." Because the bosses don't know what you know, he went on, they're worried that you're investigating them.

Their situation, as described by Rivera, was Kafkaesque. They had been outed as working undercover on an internal affairs investigation, but no one knew whether that was the only inves-

■ **"You think the feds are ever going to come against me? If they come after me, I'm going to sing a song so loud it'll crumble the department and bring all the bosses down with me."**



— "It's not what you uncover. It's not what you find out. It's what the department says."

tigation they were engaged in. So it was all too easy for the bosses to worry that they too were targets.

It was also becoming apparent that there was a particular ferocity to the abuse directed at Spalding. The ongoing attacks were distinguished by their pettiness and ugliness. When she mentioned to Chester, the FBI liaison, that she had purchased tickets to the narcotics division Christmas party, she told me, he urged her not to attend. Roti and O'Grady had both expressed such hostility toward her, Chester said, that "I wouldn't be surprised if the chief didn't have you kicked out. It's in your best interest not to go."

On another occasion, O'Grady gave instructions that Spalding was to be barred from entering the organized crime facility at Homan Square, where she was assigned a locker. A supervisor who was present later told her that O'Grady said: "She can piss outside with the rest of the rats."

The abuse followed her home. One day she reached into her mailbox and found it full of excrement. There was a note: "Since you like shit so much, thought you'd enjoy this."

**O**N FEBRUARY 12, 2012, Mohammed was arrested at home, and Watts, returning from Houston, was escorted from the terminal by FBI agents. Both were charged with theft of government funds.

The arrest was widely reported in Chicago media. The most substantial story was by Phil Rogers, a veteran correspondent for Channel 5 NBC News. Superintendent McCarthy stated, "At this point, there's nobody involved other than the two officers who were arrested." Rogers, however, quoted "sources close to the investigation" as saying that the allegations against Watts and his team "go back more than 10 years," that "other officers are under investigation," and that "troubling allegations have rumbled through investigative circles for years" that Watts had a hand in two homicides. The unnamed source "close to the investigation" was Shannon Spalding.

Why had the FBI and CPD decided to reel in Watts and Mohammed rather than continue the

investigation and engage the other targets? Why had they left other members of Watts's crew on the street? Why had they decided to conclude a decadelong investigation into allegations of massive wrongdoing reaching high and wide within the department with the arrest of two individuals on a single charge of stealing government property?

Rivera's answer, according to Spalding, was that "the powers that be" had determined "the city can't afford another scandal." Were a Watts scandal to erupt, he said, it "would make SOS look like the Boy Scouts." It was, in effect, too big to expose. The arrest and prosecution of Watts and Mohammed were thus designed to contain the scandal rather than expose it.

Soon after Watts and Mohammed were arrested, Spalding told me, she encountered Mike Barz, the commanding officer of the confidential section of internal affairs, in the parking lot of police headquarters at 35th and Michigan. (In an interview with me, Barz denied this encounter ever occurred.)

"You don't learn," he said to her. "You want to tell all. That's not how it works. It's not what you uncover. It's not what you find out. It's what the department says. Your job is to report to them. It's their job to say what happened."

Spalding was taken aback. Barz continued to berate her.

"All those promises they made to you? They lied to you. You want to be a hero? Catch a cop killer. Shut your mouth. That's how you get along. This shit will get you nowhere."

Barz offered her a final piece of advice. "You know all that work you claim that you did? If you don't have police reports with your name on them, you never worked on it. It didn't happen. You don't exist."

"But," Spalding replied, "that was for our protection."

"Think about it," said Barz. "For your protection?"

## Watch Your Back

*After Chicago police officers Shannon Spalding and Danny Echeverria filed a whistleblower lawsuit, retaliation against them only intensified.*

**I**N AUTUMN OF 2012, the code of silence was very much in the news in Chicago. The trial of the civil suit brought against the city by Karolina Obrycka, the bartender struck and kicked by off-duty Officer Anthony Abbate in 2007, was unfolding before a jury in the federal courtroom of Judge Amy St. Eve.

One of Obrycka's central claims was that Abbate assaulted her, secure in the knowledge he would be protected by the code of silence within the Chicago Police Department. In support of this claim, her lawyers presented expert testimony to demonstrate the department's failure to adequately investigate and discipline police misconduct. On November 13, 2012, the jury returned a verdict in Obrycka's favor. It awarded her \$850,000 in damages and found that a pervasive code of silence within the CPD had allowed Abbate to attack her without fear of punishment.

Mayor Rahm Emanuel was in his second year in office. In retrospect, the Obrycka verdict afforded him an opportunity to pivot away from Daley-era abuses and declare a new day for police accountability in Chicago. Instead, his administration, in an unusual move, sought to erase the precedent represented by the jury's finding that a code of silence exists within the CPD. The city entered into an agreement with Obrycka under which it would not appeal the verdict and would pay the award and attorney's fees immediately. Obrycka, in turn, joined the city in asking the judge to vacate the code of silence judgment.

The joint motion created a situation in which the public interest was unrepresented. Two law professors who specialize in police abuse cases — Craig Futterman of the University of Chicago and Locke Bowman of Northwestern Uni-



*Shannon Spalding at the site of the former Ida B. Wells Homes on March 3, 2016.* Photo: Patricia Evans

versity — intervened on behalf of the public. They argued that if the city was allowed to “buy its way out of” the judgment, it would have no incentive to make the necessary reforms. Judge St. Eve ruled against the city, holding that the jury verdict regarding the code of silence “has a social value to the judicial system and public at large.”

In their effort to have the code of silence verdict set aside, city lawyers argued that the CPD had enacted significant reforms since the 2007 bar incident. And they emphasized that the department was now led by a new superintendent who would not permit such behavior to go unpunished.

Superintendent Garry McCarthy reinforced the point by issuing a statement in which he asserted with characteristic bluntness, “I will never tolerate a code of silence in a department for which I am responsible.”

Two weeks before McCarthy uttered those words, Shannon Spalding and Danny Echeverria filed a whistleblower suit, claiming they had suffered retaliation for reporting and investigating criminal activity within the department. The





*Robert Taylor Homes, 2007.* Photo: David Schalliol

defendants named in the lawsuit included CPD brass serving directly under McCarthy, among them, Nick Roti, chief of the organized crime bureau; James O'Grady, commander of the narcotics division; and Juan Rivera, chief of the internal affairs division.

The common understanding of the code of silence is that it is a peer-to-peer phenomenon — I've got your back, you've got mine — within the rank and file. Senior officials are implicated to the extent they do not take affirmative steps to discourage operation of the code. The thesis of the Spalding case, by contrast, is that high-ranking officials ordered retaliation against the offi-

cers for violating the code.

When Spalding and Echeverria filed their lawsuit in the fall of 2012, they had an immediate aim. They hoped that, whatever the ultimate outcome of the suit, the fact of a pending case would serve to deter the retaliation against them that had only intensified after the conclusion of Operation Brass Tax, a joint investigation conducted with the FBI into a drug ring controlled by longtime Chicago police officer Ronald Watts.

After Watts and his partner, Kallatt Mohammed, were indicted, Spalding and Echeverria



had returned to the inspections unit where they continued to be ostracized and denied meaningful work. IAD Chief Juan Rivera again refused to file a retaliation complaint on their behalf. (As noted earlier, Rivera in his deposition denied that he ever received a formal request from Spalding and Echeverria.)

Barred by Chief Roti from returning to any unit in organized crime, they met with Thomas Byrne, chief of detectives, for whom they had worked when he was commander of the 1st District. A year or so earlier, he had asked them to come work for him in the fugitive apprehension unit, but they had been unable to do so because Rivera said they were still needed for the Watts investigation. Now fugitives seemed like a good fit. Both Rivera and Tina Skahill provided letters of recommendation for them. Byrne said he would place them on the U.S. Marshals Task Force Team and that as soon as spots opened up they would be deputized as U.S. Marshals. He assured them they would not encounter retaliation in his unit.

On March 20, 2012, they joined the U.S. Marshals Task Force Team. Despite all they had been through, said Spalding, “all we wanted to do was get back to doing real police work.”

It wasn’t to be. “We’re not there for 15 minutes,” recalled Spalding, “and we’re called IAD rats.”

From the start at the fugitives unit, they were in a Catch-22. They were taken off major cases and given low-level assignments like finding unknown turnstile jumpers or people who had been drunk in public. They were told to do only their assigned cases — a limited number of relatively trivial cases — and then were told they were not producing. When they reported to Rivera what was happening, said Spalding, he observed that “that’s what they do”: They give you dead-end work you can’t do, then blame you for not doing it.

Spalding said Rivera advised them to “record, record, record,” but again refused to issue a complaint register for retaliation or intervene on their behalf.

Amid the hostility in the fugitives unit, there was one seemingly sympathetic presence — Sgt. Thomas Mills, who had been in the confidential

section of IAD when Rivera was a lieutenant there. Rivera told Spalding and Echeverria to have Mills call him. Mills later reported to them that Rivera had told him they were great officers. Mills reflected back at Spalding the seriousness of her situation.

“The only thing,” he said, “between those bosses and federal prison is you. If I were you, I’d wear my vest at all times, even coming and going to work.”

By way of illustrating the political realities at internal affairs, Spalding recounted a story Mills had told them. Soon after he came to the confidential section, he was given the assignment of investigating a deputy superintendent. The allegation was that the official lived outside the city. Mills worked on the case for months and concluded the allegation was true. He produced a thick file in support of that conclusion and presented it to his supervisor. The next day, the file came back to him. There was a yellow Post-it on it with the handwritten message: “Make it unfounded.”

Upset, he took the matter up with his supervisor, who replied that he should have known how to handle the investigation “because of who it was.” In other words: The outcome should have been clear, because the accused was a boss with clout.

“From now on,” Mills told the supervisor, “just give me my assignment with the Post-it note already on it telling me what the outcome is before I waste my time.”

After recounting this story, Spalding observed, “It’s like Mike Barz said about the bosses: ‘It’s your job to report to them. It’s their job to say what happened.’ Our problem is that we took the investigation seriously. We never saw the Post-it.”

**S** P A L D I N G A N D E C H E V E R R I A ’ S account of the retaliation they endured after joining the fugitive apprehension unit is corroborated by an affidavit and deposition provided in their case by Officer Janet Hanna. Now retired, Hanna was the personal administrator for Cmdr. Joseph Salemme and Lt. Robert Cesario of fugitives. She stated that



■ **"He's your lieutenant. How do you think that's going to go for you? He's going to screw you. It's dangerous for you to remain here."**

before Spalding and Echeverria joined fugitives, Cesario warned his administrative staff in the unit that they were “IAD rats” and should not be trusted. He told sergeants under his command, in her words, “to instruct their teams of officers to not provide any backup for Shannon or Danny and to not work with them at all.” Further, Hanna stated that Cesario ordered her to give them only dead-end cases that would not result in arrests, that he personally reviewed their assignments, and that he instructed her to destroy their overtime requests. She also testified that they were denied access to the databases required to do their jobs.

On June 20, 2012, Spalding and Echeverria were ordered to meet with their direct supervisors — Sgt. Maurice Barnes, Cesario, and Salemme. Cesario informed them they were being taken off the task force because they had too few arrests and priority cases. When Spalding and Echeverria challenged Cesario about their lack of activity, Spalding recounted to me, Salemme demanded to know whether they were working for internal affairs. “You brought this baggage on yourselves,” he said. “You want to investigate bosses, you want to put bosses in jail, you should have known this would happen to you.”

“It’s a safety issue,” said Barnes, addressing himself to Spalding. “I don’t want to tell your daughter you’re coming home in a box because the team won’t help you on the street.”

Cesario spelled it out for them: They were being shifted from days to nights and reassigned to a nighttime fugitive apprehension team on the North Side. They would never be deputized by the U.S. Marshals, get a take-home car, or overtime pay.

“That will never happen for you,” he said to Spalding.

At the end of the meeting, Spalding asked, “If we had never worked on an internal corruption investigation with the FBI, would any of this be happening right now?”

“No,” replied Salemme.

Again they asked Rivera to issue a CR. Again he refused.

“I can’t help you anymore,” he said. “The ship is

sinking. The bell has rung. It’s over. You have to make it work at fugitives. This is your last stop. There’s nowhere else in CPD for you.”

Spalding and Echeverria had hoped that by filing their whistleblower lawsuit they would gain the protection of the Illinois Whistleblower Act and the abuse would relent. If anything, it intensified. The one person within fugitives they believed to be an ally, Mills, also turned against them. He rode Spalding hard.

“This is a numbers unit, and you’re not producing,” he told her. “There is no way you can redeem yourself.”

“I could have come in with Jimmy Hoffa,” Spalding observed, “and it wouldn’t have made any difference.”

Mills spoke openly about their lawsuit to other officers in front of Spalding and Echeverria. “I don’t know why they left you in this unit after you filed,” he said. “They should have launched you.”

“This isn’t good for you,” he warned Spalding. “God forbid you should have to shoot someone out there.” He pointed to Cesario’s office. “He’s your lieutenant. How do you think that’s going to go for you? He’s going to screw you. It’s dangerous for you to remain here. The bosses are actively working against you. You need to consider your options.”

She interpreted this as a suggestion she leave the department for her own safety.

“I began second-guessing everything I did,” she said.

On one occasion, as she and Echeverria set out in pursuit of a fugitive who had to be tased three times to subdue him the last time he had been brought in, they were told by Mills that the team would be there to back them up. When no one showed up, Spalding contacted Mills. He responded with a text: “Be careful.”

“My worst fear was now my reality,” Spalding recalled. “I was an officer without a department.”

When it seemed things could not get worse, they did. On April 11, 2013, Sgt. Barz and Sgt. Robert Muscolino of internal affairs came to the fugitives unit and arrested Spalding. They took

her into a room, closed the door, and held her for over half an hour. Barz read her constitutional rights and informed her that she was the subject of a criminal investigation on federal eavesdropping charges. He said they had an eyewitness who stated that she recorded conversations with Mills and then played them for others.

She would later learn from Janet Hanna that the complaint against her stated that Hanna was the person for whom she played the recording of Mills. In her affidavit, Hanna recounted being pressed by Muscolino to confirm the complaint. “I repeated that the complaint was untrue,” she stated, “that the alleged conversation never happened, and that at no time ever did Shannon play for me any recording from her phone.”

Spalding was distraught. Having failed to protect her, IAD was now, she realized, turning its investigative machinery against her and actively participating in the retaliation.

Barz suggested that the charges would go away if she dropped her lawsuit.

“This is retaliation,” she said. “What are you guys doing about Watts?”

“They can’t let him go to trial,” he said. “It’s not in the best interest of the department. They’ll make him an offer he can’t refuse.”

“Yeah,” said Spalding, “and I’m going to jail on trumped-up charges.”

He tried to mollify her. “This is all going to disappear,” he said. “None of it happened.”

(In an interview, Barz vigorously contested Spalding’s account. Specifically, he asserted that there was no arrest and that he never said the CR was “going to disappear.”)

After the IAD officers left, Spalding said, Echeverria walked her to her car. In his deposition, Echeverria recalled how agitated she was. “It was hard to have a conversation with her immediately because she was not in the right frame of mind to speak. She was very upset,” he testified. “She was crying. Shit, it made me want to cry.”

Spalding had never understood why it was that Chewbacca and countless others pleaded guilty and cut deals when falsely arrested by the likes of Watts. Now she grasped what it was like to be

caught in the machinery of a system, indifferent to your welfare and to the truth, that was dedicated to imposing its own version of reality. The collapse of her faith in the institution to which she had pledged her life was now complete.

Looking back, Spalding sees this as the moment she broke. “When you work undercover,” she told me at the time, “you learn to keep it together, even when someone has a gun to your head. I’m keeping it together on the outside, but I’m dying inside.”

The next day, she initiated the process of going on medical leave, as did Echeverria. In May 2013, both went on medical leave. After seven months, Echeverria returned to the fugitives unit. Spalding remained on leave. She has been diagnosed by a psychiatrist for the city, as well as her own therapists, as suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder due to the trauma of having her identity exposed within the department. This condition prevents her from working in law enforcement.

On June 6, 2014, Spalding turned in her badge and gun. It was, she said at the time, “the saddest day of my life.” Two years later, she speaks with raw emotion of being denied her “calling,” while some of those they investigated are still on the force. “I can’t be on the job, but they are.”

“I’m grieving a loss like a death. When they took my badge, they took my soul.”

**S** P A L D I N G ’ S S T O R Y, as it unfolds, gathers force and gains credibility, through its complexity, coherence, and detail, as well as our knowledge of what the telling has cost her. It is a challenging narrative, because the consequences of believing it are so demanding. It is also incomplete. Things she knows with absolute certainty shade into things she can only speculate about. Understandably, she inhabits an existential space where it’s tempting to organize all available data around thesis and plot: to make things cohere more tightly than messy reality allows. In my interviews with her, she has consistently resisted that temptation. She remains aware of contingencies, what-ifs, competing explanations. She continues to work the puzzle she is enmeshed in. It’s not hard to see why she is a



good investigator.

While there is much we do not yet know about the dynamics that determined the course of the Watts investigation and the fate of the investigators, what is clear are certain outcomes:

Kallatt Mohammed, Watts's partner, pleaded guilty in August 2012 and was sentenced to 18 months. He admitted in his plea agreement that he extorted protection money from drug dealers at the Ida B. Wells development "beginning no later than December 11, 2007, and continuing through at least May 22, 2008" — six months out of his long career working with Watts. He said he acted under orders from Watts. In the spring of 2014, Mohammed emerged from prison, having served his sentence.

Ronald Watts initially pleaded not guilty. Then, on July 19, 2013, on the eve of trial, he changed his plea to guilty to one count of theft of government funds. Nothing is known about the substance of negotiations with prosecutors, if any; and there is no indication in the public record that he provided any information about members of his team and others within the department who participated in his crimes.

On October 9, 2013, Watts came before Judge Sharon Johnson Coleman for sentencing. The courtroom gallery was sparsely populated — a few reporters, a couple of family members. Broad shouldered and stocky, the expressionless Watts sat at the defendant's table in a dark business suit with his fingers tightly laced in front of him.

Judge Coleman was severely constrained in what she could do within the framework presented to her. Although the maximum possible sentence was 10 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine, a sentence of 10-16 months was indicated under the federal guidelines. The government asked for 36 months. The defense asked for a sentence in line with the federal guidelines.

Watts's lawyer, Thomas Glasgow, emphasized his client's military service, his long career of public service, his role in his family, and the fact that he had no criminal record. In a remarkable passage in the sentencing memorandum he submitted to the court, Glasgow argued that Watts's crime should, for the purpose of sentencing, be treated as less grave than "pick pocketing or non-forc-

ible purse snatching" because it was not "a theft from another person against that person's will" and did not involve "increased risk of physical injury" due to the fact that "the 'taking' was both discussed and agreed upon" by Watts and Chewbacca prior to it occurring.

By contrast, the government lawyer used strong language to describe the harms that flowed from Watts's criminal enterprise. Citing Mohammed's plea statement, she said that Watts had committed crimes such as the one he was charged with many times.

Judge Coleman gave Watts an opportunity to address the court. He declined.

Coleman characterized Watts's crimes as "unconscionable" and "a betrayal." She seized on the government's description of the Wells development as a community "plagued" with crime, drug dealing, and gang activity: "The place was rampant with poverty, unemployment, addictions. The crime stuff comes after. ... You were there to protect those people, and you didn't."

She also spoke of the impact corrupt officers such as Watts have on children in the community. "They're taught not to respect anything," she said. "What else are they supposed to think?"

After a long pause, Coleman announced a sentence of 22 months, followed by one year of mandatory supervision, and restitution of \$5,200 — the amount Watts had taken in the sting.

Watts left the courtroom smiling broadly.

He has since served his sentence and relocated to Las Vegas. Apart from the \$5,200 from the final sting, he retained all assets he may have obtained through criminal activities.

The other members of Watts's team — Al Jones, Brian Bolton, and Bobby Gonzalez — remain on the force. Not long after the arrest of Watts and Mohammed, Jones was promoted to sergeant. (Spalding: "They promote you for your silence.") Gonzalez has been in the news recently due to his involvement in three separate police shootings of young black men over the last two years. None of the officers responded to requests for comment.

**A**S THE WHISTLEBLOWER lawsuit moved forward in court, various of the “bosses” named as defendants or alleged to have conspired with Watts retired from the CPD, claimed their six-figure pensions, and in most instances, moved on to other positions in law enforcement. James O’Grady and Nick Roti took leadership positions with the Illinois State Police. Ernie Brown became police chief of Darien, Illinois, and is now executive director of the Cook County Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management. Debra Kirby took a job with the Garda Siochana Inspectorate, the Irish police, and now works for a Chicago-based risk management firm. And Juan Rivera took his leave in the fall of 2015, as the whistleblower suit moved toward trial.

By virtue of Chicago’s demolition of its public housing developments, the scene of the crimes committed by Watts and his team has disappeared. So too have most of their victims as characterized by Judge Coleman at Watts’s sentencing hearing — the vulnerable public housing residents the team exploited rather than protecting, including children in the community who grew up seeing them as the face of civil authority — “invisible people,” as Spalding puts it, whose lack of standing as citizens is a major factor conferring impunity on predatory officers such as Watts.

At various points in this story, individuals have emerged from that invisible world — a world abandoned then, obliterated now — intent on bringing down the criminal enterprise of Watts & Co. Above all, Chewbacca. Also, Spalding and Echeverria’s informant from the Ickes Homes. Perhaps, too, Big Shorty and Monk Fears.

More recently, a man named Ben Baker, against long odds, established to the satisfaction of the judge who had tried him and the State’s Attorney’s Office that had prosecuted him that he had been wrongly convicted, having been falsely arrested by members of Watts’s team.

On January 14 of this year, having served 10 years of a 14-year sentence, Baker was released from prison, after the state’s attorney dropped all charges against him for possession of a controlled substance. At his trial in 2006, Baker had testified that the Watts team planted drugs on

him and falsely arrested him, because he had refused to pay them off. At the time, the judge did not find credible Baker’s description of the protection racket the Watts team operated at the Ida B. Wells development.

With help and guidance from Spalding, attorney Josh Tepfer of the Exoneration Project successfully challenged Baker’s conviction on the grounds that Baker’s allegations against the



*Loomis Courts, 2009.* Photo: David Schalliol

Watts team were corroborated by investigative materials available at the time of his trial but withheld from his attorneys. Tepfer supported this claim with FBI documents obtained via the Freedom of Information Act. Although heavily redacted, these documents establish that the FBI, IAD, and State’s Attorney’s Office were engaged in an “ongoing joint investigation” of Watts and his team for more than a decade.

Beyond achieving a measure of justice for Baker, the case is important for what it portends. Tepfer and his colleagues have brought a lawsuit against the FBI challenging the redactions under the Freedom of Information Act. They have also brought a civil suit on behalf of Ben Baker.





*Ida B. Wells Homes Extension demolition and mixed-income development construction, 2008.* Photo: David Schalliol

And they are representing a man named Lionel White who is seeking to have his conviction vacated on the ground that he was framed by Watts's team. Given the evidence that the team routinely used the threat of false arrest to coerce cooperation, how many others have shared Ben Baker's fate of being wrongfully convicted?

**NINE YEARS AFTER** contacting the FBI, six years after being ousted within the department, and 4 1/2 years after filing their lawsuit, Spalding and Echeverria finally approached their day in court.

The trial was set to begin on May 31.

As the day approached, Spalding was a singular combination of strength and fragility. Financially ruined, emotionally depleted, and grief-stricken over loss of the job that gave her life purpose and used every part of her, she prepared to tell her story in court in the face of the mutually reinforcing denials of the city and the individual defendants.

Moments before the trial was to begin, the judge announced from the bench that the parties had reached a settlement. Addressing the press in the lobby of the federal courthouse, Spalding

expressed the hope that the impact of the case would be that no other officer “has to walk one day in our shoes.”

The settlement means the issues presented by the case will not be adjudicated. It does not resolve those issues. If anything, it sharpens them. At a time when the Department of Justice is investigating the Chicago Police Department, a time when debate about how best to achieve fundamental police reform dominates Chicago politics, the questions bequeathed by the case demand sustained attention.

One set of questions relates to the criminal careers of Watts and his alleged co-conspirators. For the better part of those careers, they were under investigation by internal affairs and the FBI, as well as other law enforcement agencies (the Drug Enforcement Administration, the State’s Attorney’s Office). How is it that all there is to show for those multi-target investigations over more than a decade are the convictions of Watts and Mohammed on a single count of stealing government funds in the amount of \$5,200? Was this an instance of investigation-as-cover-up? Was the prosecution the capstone of a massive cover-up, designed not to secure information about Watts’s crimes and co-conspirators but to buy his silence? The DOJ team has the means to answer these questions. It can also assess how it is that members of Watts’s team — Al Jones, Brian Bolton, Bobby Gonzalez, and others — remain on the force. Did the investigation in fact clear them? More generally, what can be learned from the history of the Watts investigation for the purpose of diagnosing the changes required in the operation of internal affairs?

Another set of questions centers on the nature of the code of silence. The city has now irreversibly passed over a threshold: The code of silence about the code of silence has been broken. No longer can police officials on the witness stand or in depositions dismiss the term as “TV and movie related” or, in a favorite formulation oft repeated over the years, as “the title of a Chuck Norris movie.”

Mayor Emanuel in his speech to the City Council last December spoke of the code as a problem “at the very heart of the policing profession.” Then several months later, a police accountabil-

ity task force he had appointed described “a deeply entrenched code of silence supported not just by individual officers, but by the very institution itself.” Elsewhere in the report, the task force called the code “official policy.”

Yet the city in the Spalding-Echeverria case sought to retreat from the implications of those conclusions. As the trial approached, city lawyers, in an effort to avoid having the mayor testify, offered to admit to the existence of the code of silence, but then qualified the statement by adding that police cover-ups are “not pervasive, widespread, well-settled custom or practice to which the city’s chief policymakers have been indifferent.”

Similarly, Corporation Counsel Steve Patton in announcing the \$2 million settlement acknowledged the code of silence even as he minimized it. It’s a problem that must be addressed, he said, even if only a few officers engage in such behavior.

Putting aside the logical puzzle of how the code of silence can be said to exist if practiced only by a few, the city’s formulation raises a question essential to the diagnostic clarity on which meaningful reform hinges: Is the code of silence occasional aberrant behavior or standard operating procedure? If Spalding’s account is accurate, then the defendants, including some of the most senior officials in the department, lied under oath and did so in concert. (Again, their denials are available here.) If she is telling the truth, then the city of Chicago in this post-Laquan McDonald era of police reform was prepared to present a defense against claims of retaliation due to the code of silence that was itself a classic exercise in the code of silence.

For her part, Shannon Spalding has no doubt about the answer.

“The code of silence is only silent to the outside world,” she told me recently. “For cops, it’s a constant ringing in your ears from the day you enter the academy to the day you retire.”

She paused, reflecting perhaps on what fidelity to the truth has cost her and what it has brought her.

“But I’m deaf to it now.” ■

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This report would not have been possible without the testimony of former police officer Shannon Spalding.

The Invisible Institute continues to pursue this story, as well as other investigations that further transparency and accountability in public institutions.

We make an effort to follow up on and respond to all tips from citizens, including those received anonymously.

If you have information about corruption or abuse in public institutions, please contact us using one of the above methods.

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