



**ALL AGES PRODUCTIONS, DEPARTMENT OF MOTION PICTURES & ITVS
PRESENT**



Credit: Yoni Brook

PHILLY D.A.

**An independent Lens Original Series in association with Topic Studios
Created by Ted Passon, Yoni Brook & Nicole Salazar**

2021 – USA – DOCUSERIES – 110'

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THE SERIES

LOGLINE:

A groundbreaking documentary series embedded inside the long shot election and tumultuous first term of Larry Krasner, Philadelphia's unapologetic District Attorney, and the experiment to upend the criminal justice system from the inside out.

SYNOPSIS:

In 2017, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania had one of the highest incarceration rates of any major city in the United States. And it's become the epicenter of a historic experiment that could shape the future of prosecution in America for decades to come. When civil rights attorney Larry Krasner mounted a long shot campaign to become District Attorney, he ran on a bold pledge: to end mass incarceration by changing the culture of the criminal justice system from within. He shocked the establishment by winning in a landslide.

Now, the bureaucrats he spent his campaign denigrating are his co-workers; the police he alienated are his rank-and-file law enforcers. Pressure comes from all sides of a system resistant to reform. Krasner's unapologetic promise to use the power of the D.A.'s office for sweeping change is what got him elected; now that he's in office, that same stubbornness threatens to alienate those he needs to work with the most.

From the eye of the political storm, filmmakers Ted Passon, Yoni Brook, and Nicole Salazar gained unprecedented access into Krasner's office and behind the scenes of the criminal justice system. Over the course of eight episodes, *Philly D.A.* explores the most pressing social issues of our time – police brutality, the opioid crisis, gun violence, and mass incarceration – through the lens of an idealistic team attempting fundamental overhaul from within the system.

BIOGRAPHIES

Ted Passon (creator and co-director)

Ted Passon is an award-winning director and video artist. He has directed episodic series for Netflix and Disney. He is a 2016 Sundance Lab Fellow, a recipient of the Pew Foundation Individual Artist Fellowship Grant and a 2016 Headlands Artist in Residency. He has exhibited his award-winning short films in festivals and galleries around the U.S. and abroad including exhibitions by the Whitney Museum, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, and 96 Gillespie in London.

Yoni Brook (creator and co-director)

Yoni Brook is a twice Independent Spirit-nominated cinematographer and producer. As a director, his films have screened at the Berlinale, New York and Toronto Film Festivals, True/False, and IDFA. For PBS's POV series, Brook co-directed *Bronx Princess* (with Musa Syeed). Brook co-directed *The Calling*, a four-hour series about young religious leaders for *Independent Lens*. His directorial debut, *A Son's Sacrifice*, won Best Documentary Short at the Tribeca Film Festival and IDA's Best Documentary Short, and broadcast on *Independent Lens*.

Nicole Salazar (creator and co-director)

Nicole Salazar is a documentary filmmaker and journalist who has worked on investigative and breaking news stories in the US and internationally for over a decade. She was a producer for the Emmy Award-winning investigative series, *Fault Lines* on Al Jazeera. Credits include *Guatemala's Disappeared*, *Lost in the System*, *Undocumented in Trump's America* (Headline Award Winner), and worked as a producer and journalist for the award winning independent daily news program *Democracy Now!*. She was also a field producer on the documentary short *Los Comandos*, which was shortlisted for an Academy Award.

About All Ages Productions:

All Ages Productions is an award-winning creative film and video production company based in Philadelphia. AAP creates episodic short form and long form projects, as well as commercials, for outlets such as: NBC/Universal, Netflix, and others. They have also produced music videos and projects with artists such as: St Vincent, Blood Orange, Kurt Vile, Spank Rock, Tiera Whack, Iggy Pop, and others. All Ages was founded in 2011 by Ted Passon and David Dunn.

About the Department of Motion Pictures:

The Department of Motion Pictures produces narrative and documentary features and series, with a focus on ambitious, cinematic, and emotionally resonant storytelling. Over the years, members of the DMP have produced *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, *Patti Cake\$*, *Monsters & Men*, the Vimeo season of *High Maintenance*, and *Wendy*, as well as non-fiction works like *Western*, *A Thousand Thoughts* and *Bloody Nose, Empty Pockets*. Their work has premiered at festivals ranging from Sundance to Cannes to the Berlinale.

TED PASSON, YONI BROOK & NICOLE SALAZAR: AN INTERVIEW WITH THE CREATORS

What inspired you to make this series?

Ted: Three of my family members—my brother, cousin, and uncle—were all incarcerated at different points when I was young. It really complicated my childhood notion of prison being for “bad people” when I believed my family members were all good people who had made bad decisions. As I got older, I began to understand that they all suffered trauma in their lives that impacted their decisions, and it seemed to me that prison failed to address those underlying issues. I also began to understand that my family members, who are white, were privileged with benefits from the system, including shorter sentences. I realized the system was fundamentally racist. When I got involved in activism as an adult, Larry Krasner represented friends of mine who were arrested at protests. If you’re going to do civil disobedience, it’s common to write a lawyer’s number on your arm in sharpie in case you get arrested. In Philadelphia, Larry’s number got written on a lot of arms. I had never actually met him until 2017 when I learned he was throwing his hat in the ring to run for District Attorney. It was hilarious! It didn’t seem at all possible that someone with his policy proposals and brash rhetoric could win. I knew there was a story in such longshot odds. When he actually did win, it was shocking, and it was obvious that the real story to be told was what would happen next. Most films about political candidates end on election night, but we wanted to know what was going to happen when he took over the institution that he had been fighting for over 30 years.

How one creates change in the world is a crucial question in these times, and we suddenly found ourselves with a front row seat to record what might be a historic attempt at making change in the criminal justice system—or a total failure.

Yoni: We first saw Larry Krasner speak in 2017, then a candidate for District Attorney in Philly. To see this defense attorney so forcefully critique the criminal justice system at a time when it was quite radical to do so, was both jarring and exhilarating. Krasner was arguing for a kind of systemic change that seemed impossible in the face of vast institutional inertia. We had to find out how far he would go, where it would all lead, and if this reform he was speaking of was actually attainable. By capturing all of this, we thought if nothing else, we could document people attempting change in real time, whatever the outcome—sweeping success, cautionary tale, or something in between.

Nicole: After working so hard to gain access to these rooms where decisions were being made that impacted the lives of so many people, we realized that we had the opportunity to bring the public into an institution they had never gotten to really see before. We felt a responsibility to the material that we were capturing. A film would simply not do right to the richness of the content we had worked so hard to get. It became clear this had to be a series, one that depicted the wide range of power and

discretion held by the D.A.'s office, the applications of that power and the ways it impacts people.

How did you secure such wide-ranging access to the District Attorney's office?

Everybody told us Krasner was crazy for allowing us in the door of the DA's office—it's a place known for secrecy. The ACLU refers to the D.A.'s office as the "black box" of the criminal justice system. As a career civil rights attorney, Krasner had no idea how to be the D.A. when he took office in 2018. We didn't know how to make a series about a sprawling bureaucracy. We were both new at our jobs. Our only plan was to just start filming and take it one day at a time. After his inauguration, we filmed him walking into the D.A.'s office for the first time, and then we just kept coming back every day. We never had an official press pass or even a designated minder. We became part of the furniture. We worked as a small team, no more than two people, one of us was shooting and another recording sound, and we just started talking to people and building relationships.

We always tried to make it clear that this was more than just a portrait of Krasner. The series is a way to show audiences around the U.S.—most of whom are probably unfamiliar with what a D.A. even does—the nuts and bolts of an institution that dictates a substantial amount of local policymaking. We captured a wide range of perspectives and developed relationships with prosecutors in Larry's office, his staff, law enforcement officials, judges, victims of crime, and people who had been directly impacted by incarceration or over-policing. While we were in the DA's office seeing decisions being made we wanted to make sure we could spend time with people who were being impacted by those decisions in as many parts of the system as possible. We felt a tremendous responsibility to everybody who shared their lives with us on camera.

Cameras are forbidden in Philly courtrooms. At first, we assumed that meant our documentary would lack drama, but we decided to lean into the drama that goes on behind the scenes of the courtroom that the public never sees, the policymaking and political jockeying that is the real aspect of criminal justice that "courtroom dramas" can't capture. Krasner told us he was open to filming because he wanted people to be able to imagine themselves doing what he was doing. It was his hope that if people could observe the ins and outs of the D.A.'s job, it would demystify the office and encourage people to learn about their local D.A. and become politically involved.

Were there any agreements between the filmmakers and DA in terms of editorial approval/control?

Yes, the agreement was we would have complete editorial control. In fact, Krasner and his staff have still not seen the full series. However, we take the generosity of any subject appearing on camera seriously. We never recorded surreptitiously. We didn't use lavalier mics, just a boom which would be roving overtly as we recorded and we

always had the camera's tally lamp engaged. That way people understood exactly when they were being recorded. There were moments that, by law, we couldn't film or observe, and other more rare moments when we were told to turn the camera off, and we always respected that. We felt a tremendous responsibility to capture nuance and avoid making any participant seem like a villain, whether we agreed with their stances personally or not. We made an effort to get to know people that Krasner disagreed with—whether former prosecutors or police officers. It was important for us to uncover the human story about what it takes to make change underneath the policies and the politics.

What impact do you hope the series makes on viewers?

There are thousands of district attorneys across the USA, many of whom are incumbents that run for office unchallenged. More and more of that is changing—Krasner is just one of a growing number of progressives who have run and won elections in recent years. But if you care about a balanced criminal justice system you should know who your local prosecutor is. They aren't just the government official who shows up on the evening news when there's a high-profile crime. They're elected policymakers with a tremendous amount of power. This series is for anyone who wants to understand the pressure points in the system to make change.

What are the elements of the series that make it relevant on a national basis, and not just as a local series about the DA's office in Philadelphia?

The city of Philadelphia is a specific lens, but the issues at stake in the stories we follow are in contention all around the country. Mass incarceration, the lack of accountability in policing, systemic racism in the legal system, the debate over how resources are best spent to achieve public safety—are questions being raised in every community. The series also raises questions that are universal. What is the role of punishment in the justice system? Should we be defined by our worst mistakes? How do we make change? What is justice? We hope Philly D.A. will contribute to these conversations.

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FACT SHEET

What are the responsibilities of a District Attorney?

The main responsibility of a District Attorney, or DA, is to pursue justice on behalf of the state or local government's citizens when someone is accused of breaking the law. When the police arrest someone and charge them with a crime in district court, the local District Attorney's office has the power to either prosecute those cases, divert the accused to a program or drug treatment, or dismiss the case altogether.

Once a person has charges against them formally read, a judge will make a bail determination, and the request for bail is often made by the District Attorney's Office. The DA's office also has the responsibility of providing the evidence they will use to prosecute the case to the person charged. In addition, DAs have the power to negotiate plea deals and influence sentencing decisions. As the top prosecutor, the DA also helps to set policies that can reform the criminal legal system on the whole. ([ACLU](#))

How is a DA elected?

DAs are elected to 4-year terms in countywide elections. The elections occur during the midterms, which are typically in May. If no candidate gets more than half the vote, the two candidates with the most votes have a runoff election in November.

Mass Incarceration in America

- **25%** – The U.S. has 5% of the world's population but nearly 25% of its incarcerated population.
- **\$87B** – The country's spending on jails and prisons reached \$87 billion in 2015, an increase of 1000% from the \$7.4 billion spent in 1975.
- **2.2M** – In 1972, there were only 200,000 people incarcerated in the United States. Today that number has grown to 2.2 million.
- **750%** – From 1980 to 2017, the number of women in jails and prisons in the U.S. grew 750%. Over 225,000 women are incarcerated today.

([Equal Justice Initiative](#))

In the American criminal justice system, wealth—not culpability—shapes outcomes. Many people charged with crimes lack the resources to investigate cases or obtain the help they need, leading to wrongful convictions and excessive sentences.

Racial disparities persist at every level from misdemeanor arrests to executions. The “tough on crime” policies that led to mass incarceration are rooted in the belief that Black and brown people are inherently guilty and dangerous—and that belief still drives excessive sentencing policies today. More incarceration doesn’t reduce violent crime. Using prisons to deal with poverty and mental illness makes these problems worse. People leave overcrowded and violent jails and prisons more traumatized, mentally ill, and physically battered than they went in.

Today, nearly 10 million Americans—including millions of children—have an immediate family member in jail or prison. More than 4.5 million Americans can’t vote because of a past conviction. And each year, the U.S. loses \$87 billion in GDP due to mass incarceration. ([Equal Justice Initiative](#))

Glossary

Bail – The amount of money that a person charged with a crime must post in order to be released until their trial.

Felony – The most serious grade of crime, which generally carries a maximum penalty of imprisonment for more than five years.

Misdemeanor – A crime that generally has a maximum penalty of imprisonment of less than five years. If the defendant is charged with a misdemeanor he or she will be tried in Municipal Court.

Plea Deal – An agreement between the defendant and prosecutor in which the defendant agrees to plead guilty to some or all of the charges against them without a trial in exchange for concessions from the prosecutor, such as a reduced sentence.

Sentencing – The process by which the judge decides the appropriate punishment for the defendant after he or she is found guilty.

([Cornell](#), [Phila.gov](#), [Shasta County](#))

CREDITS

Created by	Ted Passon Yoni Brook Nicole Salazar
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Executive Producers for Topic	Ryan Chanatry Gena Konstantinakos Jeff Seelbach
Executives in Charge for PBS	Erin O'Flaherty Pamela Aguilar
Executive Producer	Patty Quillin
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