

## Emily Neil Testimony

Thank you City Council members for inviting me here today to share what I witnessed and experienced on May 31 in West Philadelphia.

My name is Emily Neil, and I live in Councilmember Gauthier's district, in West Philadelphia. I have lived and worked in Philadelphia as a journalist since January 2018. I care deeply about the city that I have come to call home, and I am passionate about the importance of local and community-driven journalism in shaping its future.

My instinct and commitment as a journalist is what led me to be present as a freelance, unaffiliated reporter at the events occurring on 52nd Street in West Philadelphia on May 31. I walked about 10 minutes from where I live to arrive on the scene with a DSLR camera and my phone at around 5:00 p.m.

At 52nd and Chestnut Streets I observed a crowd of people and a large police presence. Several minutes after I arrived, an armored vehicle came from behind the police barricade at the intersection of 52nd and Chestnut streets, and police began to fire teargas indiscriminately from the vehicle. Along with many other people gathered there, I ran down 52nd St. towards Sansom Street in an effort to avoid the tear gas.

Minutes later, I walked back toward Chestnut Street. There were very few people there. I turned left at the corner, onto Chestnut Street. I and another man who was ten feet or so to my left began to record as three police officers were arresting someone on the other side of the street. Another officer in a SWAT uniform was walking back and forth near the officers making the arrest. The man to my left told police that he was recording, asking them not to "shoot us" because we were recording. There was no one else on the sidewalk in that immediate area where we were standing.

A police officer, or officers, who were in SWAT uniforms, opened fire with rubber bullets, shooting first at the man to my left who was recording and then at myself. I immediately began to run, towards the corner of Chestnut and 52nd Streets, in order to turn the corner onto 52nd Street and run towards Sansom Street, away from the police.

I was struck on my backside as I was running, and I saw that the rubber bullets were both behind me and in front of me. When I realized that I might be running forward into more rubber bullets, I instinctively sought to protect myself by diving towards the ground. As I did so, I was struck in the head. I laid on the ground for a moment and I quickly realized I was bleeding profusely from my head. The man who had been recording stopped to help me, and another bystander came to my aid and they applied pressure to the wound. They helped me around the corner, where I sat down, and they then asked if I could stand up and walk towards Sansom, as they thought that the police were going to fire more teargas. They helped me walk to Sansom Street, where a doctor on the scene examined my wounds and kept me sitting down until the ambulance arrived. I was taken to Jefferson University Hospital and received eight stitches in my forehead. I discovered another wound underneath my hair that evening after I got home from the hospital.

In the week following, I had severe headaches and head pain, and had difficulty reading and writing. In the months following the incident, I have experienced episodes of panic and anxiety as a result of specific triggers which remind me of the event.

I remember speaking with a medical professional after the event. He asked me, as he removed my stitches, about what happened. He is Black, and in response to what I related, he said, "Thank you for being there, but just know that you stepped into a moment of what for others is a lifetime." I can think of no better way to contextualize my experience, as a white Philadelphian, and I ask you, the members of City Council, to consider this testimony of a moment of what I experienced as indicative of what for Black Philadelphians is a lifetime.

I would ask City Council to consider that the use of "less-lethal" force, including rubber bullets and teargas, can result in lifelong physical and psychological damage.

I would also ask the members of City Council to consider that the protection of First Amendment rights for credentialed journalists, unaffiliated journalists, and each and every civilian who seeks to lawfully and peacefully exercise their constitutional right to record on public property is a pillar of our democracy. To target someone exercising that right, or for a law enforcement agency to perpetrate and permit attacks on that individual, is to violate the most basic tenets of our democracy, first put forth in our own city over two centuries ago.

Thank you very much for your time and for listening to me today.