

To whom it may concern,

My name is Matthew Hamilton, I am a teacher, writer, theologian, and community organizer here in Seattle. I am writing to you because you are about to decide whether or not to send a close friend of mine, Matthew Erickson, to jail. His case number is 589641. Matthew and I are brothers in the Spirit; we have bonded over the years through fidelity to God, and to God's people - the downtrodden, oppressed, exploited, and impoverished, the very same people you spend your days judging.

Matthew was attacked by a mob of people because he was filming the police while they were harassing a young man of color. He successfully defended himself, and your court is now criminalizing him for this. I am writing to urge you to give him the minimum possible sentence. I am deeply concerned about the fact that his public defender was overstretched and unprepared to adequately defend him; for example, he never called a weapons expert to the stand to show that Matthew's knife was legal. Moreover, the jury was not a jury of Matthew's peers; he grew up in a Black community in South Seattle, and I did not see a single Black person on the jury.

During the trial discussion over jury instructions, Judge Rosen said Matthew cannot claim self defense because he did not exhaust other options, such as calling the police on his attackers. After hearing the various testimonies, how could we possibly believe that the police would have protected Matthew? We saw in the Pacific Place security camera footage how the officers pushed him toward the crowd that had attacked him, allowing one of his attackers to kick or stomp on him.

Since you are a judge, I imagine that you see yourself as independent of the police, sitting above them as an impartial arbiter. Judge Rosen's actions during Matthew's trial are prompting many people to question his impartiality, and the purported impartiality of the court system in general. Many of us have been skeptical of this for years, after seeing how the courts in general treat working class people of color and how they fail to hold police officers accountable when they engage in abuse and murder.

If you claim to be an impartial arbiter, you must consider the possibility that the police might have been engaged in a personal or political vendetta against Matthew. After all, he is an outspoken critic of police brutality. He had filed complaints against officers Chace and Clay in the past. How do you know for sure that the police did not allow the crowd to attack Matthew in retaliation for these vocal stances? How do you know for sure that the "community policing" methods that the officers testified about do not entangle them in corruption, or other unethical relationships with the street youth who composed that mob?

As he stated in court, Matthew chose to defend himself with a knife because he considered these scenarios to be reasonable possibilities. I am convinced that was a rational consideration on his part, one that any intelligent person would make if faced with his situation. If there is even the slightest possibility that any of these activities might have been happening, it is completely unreasonable to suggest that Matthew rely on potentially corrupt cops to protect his safety. This is especially true considering that Matthew is a Black man in a society where a Black person is killed by police or vigilantes every 28 hours (<http://www.alternet.org/news-amp-politics/1-black-man-killed-every-28-hours-police-or-vigilantes-america-perpetually-war-its>).

Moreover, Matthew appears to be free from hatred or a desire for vengeance against his attackers. He has repeatedly stated that they are fellow oppressed people, part of the same class he comes from. He has stated that he sees the situation as another attempt on the part of the police to divide and conquer oppressed communities.

Matthew defended himself from the crowd because he wanted to stay alive and he thought they might send him to the hospital or the grave. However, Matthew also showed compassion for those attacking him, a hard-earned compassion for his enemies that he developed while reading the Bible in prison many years ago. He refused to call the cops on his attackers because he knows that the job of the police is to capture people and force them behind bars. When the prosecutor asked him why he didn't call the police, he answered "because I don't think anyone should be kidnapped", by which he meant arrested. He knows what jail and prison are like. He has lived under what Michelle Alexander calls the New Jim Crow regime. He knows how degrading and dehumanizing incarceration is, and he does not wish it on anyone - even on a mob of people he knew had the immediate power to deliver him brain damage or death.

This compassionate stance is consistent with the work Matthew has done for years in the community, including his work with houseless youth. Matthew is one of the most caring and generous people I know. He spends his time struggling for a world where everyone has what they need. Ever since he got out of prison years ago, Matthew committed himself to building up safer and more self-reliant communities through volunteer service and political activism. For example, during the Decolonize/ Occupy Seattle movement, he helped deescalate conflicts among houseless youth, and helped provide positive opportunities for youth to participate in building resilient communities and mutual aid. He challenged sexual violence and misogyny within the movement, trying to create a safer environment for all participants. He has also mentored youth, encouraging them to resolve

conflicts amongst each other so that they can unify and collectively challenge racism and police brutality. If everyone were to do what Matt Erickson does on a day to day basis, all of our communities would be much safer.

This is one of the many reasons why Matthew's friends ran a campaign encouraging people to write him in for judge in the recent election, in opposition to Judge Rosen. We intend to do this again during the next election.

I cannot help but wonder whether officers Chase and Clay allowed the crowd to attack him because they are attempting to jeopardize the community work Matthew is engaged in. Are they engaging in a project of divide-and-conquer, pitting one group of youth against him in order to silence him, as well as other youth who might be inspired by him to speak up against police brutality? These are questions that must be answered by a thorough investigation into officers Chase and Clay's relations with downtown youth, and the SPD's Community Policing practices in general. We are demanding that City Hall engage in such an investigation, with community oversight.

In the meantime, I urge you not to punish Matthew Erickson simply for defending himself with a legal weapon from a crowd that attacked him. If you impose a harsh sentence, many of us will view it as one more facet of institutional racism within the criminal justice system; you will be showing what price Black people must pay for exercising their fundamental right to self defense here in Seattle. It will further undermine the court's credibility and claims of objectivity. It will also remove Matthew from the positive work he is doing in the community. As economic crisis looms, and violence continues to proliferate, our communities need more people with Matthew's courage, compassion, and intellectual ability.

Sincerely,

Matthew Hamilton  
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