

# Racist Trees

A film by Sara Newens and Mina T. Son

A Wild Pair Films Production

In Association with Wayfarer Studios



## **World Premiere: IDFA 2002 - Frontlight section**

Runtime: 85 minutes

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## **Tagline**

To change the present, sometimes you have to uproot the past.

## **Logline**

Racial tensions are reignited as a historically Black neighborhood in Palm Springs fights for the removal of a wall of trees that many believe were originally planted as a totem of segregation.

## **Synopsis**

Cut off from the glitz and glamor of Palm Springs, and overshadowed by towering sixty-foot Tamarisk trees, lies the historically Black Lawrence Crossley neighborhood. Allegedly planted by the City in the late 1950's to line the 14th fairway of a City-owned golf course, these trees have become the focal point of frustration and animosity for locals who see the trees as an enduring symbol of segregation. For decades, residents have been forced to put up with the tangled overgrowth from a species so invasive, they have been officially categorized as a pest by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Until now.

*Racist Trees* investigates the timely story of racial conflict in an unlikely, liberal pocket of America, uncovering an even darker racist history that few would equate with the city's progressive image. An intimate, sobering, and at times humorous look at the intersection of local politics, news media, race, class, gentrification, and social justice, *Racist Trees* reveals a microcosm of racial tension that continues to percolate across the country today.

## **Filmmakers' Statement**

This began as a passion project four years ago after reading a newspaper article about a historically Black neighborhood in Palm Springs that had been fighting city leaders to remove a wall of 60-foot trees for decades. And despite the current progressive landscape of this California town, we were surprised to learn that City leaders were hesitant to acknowledge the trees as a vestige of racial discrimination. After spending time with the community, we learned of the troubling legacy of systemic racism that extended even beyond these trees – in the early 1960s, communities of color were forcibly removed from their homes in an area called Section 14 to make way for prime real estate that is now at the center of Palm Springs. It quickly became clear that this story about the erasure of a small community – consisting of only 76 homes in a far off corner of Palm Springs – is a microcosm for the issues that people face across the United States today.

Though racial tensions in this country are a serious matter, our aim was to tackle this heavy subject in a human way – with nuance, a sense of lightness, and even humor at times in hopes of disarming our viewers in order to have more honest conversations about race, even when it is difficult and uncomfortable. It felt like our country was ready for this after the murder of George Floyd when we could no longer ignore the brutal reality of racism in this country. But as the headlines faded, so did the urgency of this topic in many circles. And while this particular story may feel isolated to Palm Springs, the truth is that every city has a story of their own – from New York to Los Angeles and even overseas – and these stories must be told.

## Stills & Quotes from the Film



### Crossley Tract, Palm Springs

*"In many cities, there is a line of demarcation that separates those who 'belong' and those that do not. It can be trees. It could be a railroad. It can be a street. While certainly, inanimate objects should not take on human characteristics, they do represent the racism of people."*

- Andre M. Perry, Senior Fellow at Brookings Institution



### Charles Metcalf, Crossley Tract resident

*"We can't downplay what happened in history. Because [the city] will tell you quickly, it's not racially motivated, or we don't know anything about that. Okay well you're here now. So let's see what you do. Because I'm paying attention."*



**Kevin Williams, Crossley Tract resident**

*"I feel segregated from [the city]. I feel like I'm not a part of Palm Springs with those trees up. I feel like, why am I not on a golf course view? Why is my property value not going up gradually? What's going on? Well, they want to keep you down."*



**Trae Daniel, Crossley Tract resident**

*"When I arrived here in 2003, the neighborhood was predominantly Black. I came looking for a property in a particular price range. The realtor said, 'I don't think the area is very good.' We're driving down the side of the golf course. I'm thinking, wow, this looks really nice to me, and then you pass this wall of trees. You're in an entirely different world."*

## Press Coverage of the Trees

**PALM SPRINGS**

# Long ago, these trees were planted for racist reasons, neighbors say. Now they want them gone

**Corinne S Kennedy** Palm Springs Desert Sun

Published 3:38 p.m. PT Sept. 28, 2017 | Updated 1:58 p.m. PT Dec. 19, 2017

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A row of tall tamarisk trees separates the Crossley Tract neighborhood from the city-owned Tahquitz Creek Golf Course on the other side. *Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun*

[The Desert Sun](#)



[Fox News](#)

## About the Filmmakers

### **Sara Newens, Director + Producer + Editor**

Sara Newens is a Los Angeles-based documentary filmmaker and Emmy-award winning editor who began her career working for CBS News in New York City. She recently collaborated with Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering on the HBO docuseries ALLEN V. FARROW, which garnered 7 Emmy nominations, including Outstanding Picture Editing as well as Cinema Eye Honors and ACE Eddie award nominations. She also served as Editor/Writer for Dick and Ziering's feature, ON THE RECORD, which premiered at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival. She is known for Directing/Producing/Editing the documentary feature TOP SPIN and The New York Times Op-Docs film, FOOTPRINT. A graduate of the MFA Documentary Film Program at Stanford University, she continues to create original work through her production company Wild Pair Films.

### **Mina T. Son, Director + Producer**

Mina T. Son is a Korean American documentary filmmaker based in Los Angeles. She founded Wild Pair Films with filmmaking partner, Sara Newens. Their debut documentary feature, TOP SPIN, was acquired by First Run Features and was hailed by the L.A. Times as "table tennis' HOOP DREAMS." She is currently in post-production on a longitudinal documentary about the recovery of a Japanese town after the 2011 tsunami. Mina holds an MFA in Documentary Film from Stanford University and a BA in Psychology from the University of California, Los Angeles. RACIST TREES is Wild Pair Films' second documentary feature.

### **Joanna Sokolowski, Producer**

Joanna Sokolowski is an Emmy award-winning documentary producer. She was recently senior producer on the Spotify original podcast AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE OFFICE, and story producer for the Netflix original WE ARE THE CHAMPIONS. She directed/produced the ARTIST AND MOTHER and CITY RISING for KCET with filmmaking partner Kate Trumbull LaValle. Both films went on to win LA Press Club Awards, including best Gender/LGBTQ Reporting and Best Activism Journalism. Her first feature OVARIAN PSYCOS premiered at SXSW and was broadcast on PBS Independent Lens. She holds an MA in Social Documentation from University of California, Santa Cruz.

### **Courtney Parker, Co-Executive Producer**

Courtney Parker is one of the most sought after storytellers in television and film. Helming as a writer and producer of one of TV's #1 franchise, LAW & ORDER: CRIMINAL INTENT, Parker previously served as V.P. of Alternative Programming for Adaptive Studios and Executive in Charge of Production for TVOne. For the last twenty years, Parker has served as a Celebrity ghost-writer for over two dozen plus titles leading her to form her own production company LostNThought Productions. Additionally, Parker has created and/or worked on a variety of television's hit shows including but are not limited to OWN's BEHIND EVERY MAN, THE CONNIE JONES STORY for Tyler Perry Studios, Oxygen's True Crime series, THREE DAYS TO LIVE, TV One's hit show, HOLLYWOOD DIVAS, VH1's top-rated franchise LOVE & HIP HOP and her newest series INFAMY: WHEN FAME TURNS DEADLY. Courtney's LostNThought Productions company currently has several new projects in active production.

### **Jerry Henry, Director of Photography**

Jerry Henry is a Los Angeles-based Director/DP who received his MFA degree from UCLA's prestigious Production Program with an emphasis on Documentary and Cinematography. Jerry's visual talents can be seen in such films as the Oscar-nominated EXIT THROUGH THE GIFT SHOP, Peabody-winning AMERICAN REVOLUTIONARY, the HBO docuseries THE DEFIANT ONES. Jerry contributed cinematography on the Oscar Nominated documentary short film ST. LOUIS SUPERMAN. His most recent work is the Documentary/ Narrative hybrid adaptation of the Ta-Nehisi Coates book BETWEEN THE WORLD AND ME for HBO Max and HIGH ON THE HOG for Netflix. He is currently shooting documentary series THE 1619 PROJECT with the Pulitzer Prize winning NYTimes Journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones for Hulu/ ABC/ Disney+.

## Credits

Featuring	Charles Metcalf, Jr. Kevin Williams Trae Daniel J.R. Roberts Corinne Kennedy Jarvis Crawford Kevin Harmon Rosie Mediano Harmon Janel Hunt
Directed and Produced by	Sara Newens + Mina T. Son
Executive Producers	Steve Sarowitz + Endyia Kinney-Sterns
Producers	Justin Baldoni + Andrew Calof
Co-Executive Producer	Courtney Parker
Producer	Joanna Sokolowski
Written by	Sara Newens + Joanna Sokolowski
Director of Photography	Jerry Henry
Additional Camera	Rafael Roy, Helki Frantzen, Alan Sanchez, Genéa Gaudet, Emilia Quinton
Camera Assistants	Serena Hodges, Nhu Nguyen
Sound	Ben Chan, Kelin Verrette, Patrick Reilly, Alan Sanchez, Freddie Sanchez
Editor	Sara Newens
Additional Editors	Jenn Harper, Parker Laramie, Joe Peeler
Associate Editors	Temitope Olutunmbi
Assistant Editors	Summers Henderson, Yemane Deneke
Original Music	William Ryan Fritch
Music Editor	Benjamin Kaplan
Music Consultant	Willa Yudell
Archival Producer	Rebecca Kent
Archival Researcher	Gabrielle Koehler
Production Assistant	Caley Parker
Research Assistants	Bree Andruzzi, Hannah Jain
Interns	Julian Ros, Kaylee Kim
Design and Animation by	RhoPro
Post Production Services	Fancy Films