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OCEAN CITY FILM FESTIVAL FEATURES DOCUMENTARY ABOUT POCOMOKE CITY, “THE FRIENDLIEST TOWN”

OCEAN CITY, MD — FEB. 15, 2021 — In 2011, the town of Pocomoke City, Md. hired Kelvin Sewell, a former Baltimore City police detective and the town’s first Black police chief, to address the town’s crime problem. Five years later, the town fired Sewell over racial discrimination disputes. The film, “The Friendliest Town,” documents the story and will stream as part of the 5th Annual Ocean City Film Festival, March 4-11, 2021.

Pocomoke City, Maryland’s southernmost town on the lower Eastern Shore, has a population of 4,000 people, equally split along racial lines. The title of the movie comes from the motto posted on the town’s sign: “Welcome to Pocomoke City, The Friendliest Town on the Eastern Shore.” In 2011 when the town hired Sewell, it was experiencing escalating crime including drug dealing and violent activities.

Sewell, a former Baltimore city homicide investigator and narcotics officer, had grown tired of the tactics used by the Baltimore Police Department, particularly those targeting Black communities. In Pocomoke, Sewell deployed a different approach to law enforcement and implemented a community policing plan, parking squad cars and walking the streets. The officers got to know residents and built

relationships with the citizens. The town celebrated a full year without a murder after Sewell implemented his new system.

An ongoing dispute over racial discrimination soon engulfed Sewell and his officers, cost them their jobs and professional reputations, and thrust them into a legal battle that would touch the Worcester County community. In 2015, the town of Pocomoke City fired Sewell and another Black officer, and subsequently filed “misconduct in office” charges against the former police chief.

Sewell is currently the Chief Senior Investigator at the Office of the State's Attorney for Baltimore City, where he supervises 12 investigators.

Directed by *The Real News Network* reporter Stephen Janis and produced by Taya Graham, “The Friendliest Town” documents the ongoing legal story as well as the aftermath for the town’s Black community.

“The debate over policing has never been more fraught, or lacking in context,” said Director Stephen Janis. “We think the story of how one small town grappled with the issues of race and law enforcement will reveal broader truths about both.

“As a veteran investigative reporter who has covered a deeply troubled and corrupt police department in Baltimore for fifteen years, documenting the battle over chief Kelvin Sewell and the rising political consciousness of the town's Black community offered a rare perspective on how policing can work,” Janis continued. “But it was also a primer on how racism intervenes, and how risky it can be for officers to push back against it.”

The *Friendliest Town* includes interviews with those at the center of story, including former chief Sewell, Pastor Ronnie White, Diane

Downing, Pocomoke City Councilman Todd Nock, Rev. James Jones, Michelle Lucas, and Worcester County Commissioner Joshua Nordstrom. It includes archival footage from town council meetings and other events, as well as updates on current legal proceedings.

The Friendliest Town will stream as part of the Ocean City Film Festival, March 4-11, 2021. Festival passes are on sale now at OCMDFilmFestival.com or by calling 410-524-9433. Prices allow customization to create a personal viewing experience. Passes start at \$10 per feature film or film block. Multi-film packages are also available: 6 features and/or film blocks, \$49; 13 features and/or film blocks, \$99. All-Access Pass are \$149.

The Art League of Ocean City is a non-profit organization dedicated to bringing the visual arts to the community through education, exhibits, scholarship, programs and community art projects.

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THE FRIENDLIEST TOWN



He fought to change policing. It started a movement.