[Snap Judgment]

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If you think that right now more than ever, it is important to experience life from another perspective, please hit pause. Hit pause for just a moment before continuing with the program and support storytelling that matters at *snapjudgment.org*. And thank you.

[upbeat music]

I'm late in the mornings. Always late. Late out of the bed, late into the shower, late out of the shower, late filling the thermos, late running out to the car with my backpack. Wait, is my laptop even in here? Of course. The day I'm super late is the day I can't find my keys. Where are my keys? I go back in the house. Keys are on the table right where I left them. Dash back to the car, pull out. Got to get this boy of mine to school. Stop at the red light, right before the freeway. Red, red, red. Green. Three cars in front of me. Go, go. No car moves. Go. Wide open green light, nobody moving. It's early. But I'm trying, Snappers. I'm trying my best not to be that guy.

[exhales]

One-one thousand, two-one thousand, three-one thousand, four-- Go. I lay on the horn, try pulling around crazy to give the driver that "you idiot" look and see the reason she stopped. She's trying to roll down her window to give an unhoused person a few dollars, but she's flustered, probably because some clown is beeping his horn at her. She apologizes to the guy and pulls out without handing him anything. I know there's not a dollar, not a nickel of actual cash in my car. I tell the man, "Hey, uh, I'm sorry about that. I'm sorry." He looks back at me. He sees me. Then, I turn away, I pull off onto the freeway, and it's not right. Something happened. I feel bad, but feeling bad doesn't cut it. There were divides. There was the man, the woman trying to help him, and me beeping to get on the road. How should we treat each other? What do we do? And who decides?

[upbeat music]

Today, a tiny exploration into that question. Snap proudly presents Whip Law. My name is Glynn Washington. From now on, I'm slowing down in the morning. I hope you can too, when you're listening to Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

Our story today comes from Fil Corbitt, and originally aired on their podcast, The Wind. The Wind is a podcast all about listening, about the politics of sound. In the last half of the 20-teens, one sound became ubiquitous in downtown Reno, Nevada. The sound of homemade bullwhips, assembled and cracked by a growing community of houseless whip makers. This story follows Fil on their search for Reno's best whip maker and investigates how the police and city government deal with the unsheltered population taking up sonic real estate.

[clock chimes]

**Fil:** It's a cold, windy morning in Downtown Reno, Nevada, and I'm standing on the steps of the Methodist Church. I'm waiting for a guide named Nando who promised to meet me here and teach me how to make a bullwhip. Nando made that promise yesterday too, but I was here at high noon, and I was still here when the sun got low. I walked a few miles down the river, asking people in every tent camp if they had seen him today. Over the past few years, an unlikely culture of whip making, and whip cracking has taken root in the houseless community of Downtown Reno. During an exhaustive investigation of this world, I keep hearing one name. The best whip raider in town is Nando.

[intriguing music]

Usually when I've seen Nando, he's been on a bicycle by the Truckee River. He'll zip by with a fishing rod way too fast to stop for an interview, which is exactly what he does again, right now in front of the church. But this time, instead of just waiting or leaving, I decide to tail him. I've been watching a lot of noir films lately, and my jacket collar is already pulled up on account of the cold wind. I lose him for a block, but when I round the next corner, he's there. He sees me, says he's busy, and before I get a word in, he pedals across the street. I continue to stand there on the curb. I watch him duck into a weekly motel faded neon sign, broken room numbers hanging askew. Wispy clouds behind me muffle the sun.

[intriguing music]

When he reemerges a while later, he has someone with him. They head toward the river, and I keep following. Nando's friend nervously looks back at me. They pass through the plaza where the guys practice whip cracking. They cross a bridge to convene with some people in the willows, and eventually, Nando is alone.

[intriguing music]

I jog up to him, and we walk and talk for a few blocks. He says he was just arrested on a failure to appear warrant, spent a night in jail. The cops busted his phone, and he's been asking around for a new one. He tells me, yeah, he'll still teach me to make a whip, but I need to provide the supplies. Four bundles of paracord and a roll of athletic tape. Then, come by his motel room tomorrow. "You saw where I live," he says. And like that, I've got an appointment with the best whip maker in Downtown Reno.

[intriguing music fades]

**Female Speaker:** All right, thank you so much. At this time, I'd love to start the pledge of allegiance.

**Group:** I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands--

**Fil:** It's a hot day in August. Outside, the air is thick with smoke. But inside City Hall and downtown, it's air conditioned. Lieutenant Ryan Connelly with the Reno Police Department gets up in front of the City Council.

**Lieutenant Ryan:** Lieutenant Ryan Connelly with the Reno Police Department for the record.

**Fil:** He queues up some PDF slides on the projector, and then he asks the Reno City Council to outlaw whips.

**Lieutenant Ryan:** The popularity of possessing a whip and cracking has grown significantly over the last few years, you've heard several citizens say.

**Fil:** Connelly claims the department is getting flooded with calls. Not only about the actual whip use, but also by people mistaking the crack of a whip for gunshots.

**Lieutenant Ryan:** Calls for service regarding the whips have nearly doubled in the last year.

**Fil:** He says that in the last year, they've received 176 calls about it.

**Operator:** Dispatch. This is [unintelligible [00:09:54]. How can I help you?

**Kim:** Yeah, there's a guy with a whip intimidating people down at square downtown near the river.

**Operator:** 911, what is the location of the emergency?

**Male Speaker:** On first, what sounds like gunshots to me.

**Operator:** 911, where is your emergency?

**Male Speaker:** I just got reported shots fired down at the Truckee River.

**Operator:** It looks like we're on the way down. It's possible there's a subject with a whip that she might have been hearing that, but we're sending [crosstalk] them down to go and check.

**Male Speaker:** Well, that's what I suspect it is.

[whip cracks]

**Fil:** The lieutenant plays this shaky cell phone video on the projector. It shows a couple of guys with bullwhips cracking them in a downtown park on the river, just a few blocks upstream from City Hall.

[whip cracks]

A quick diversion into the weeds here. As you probably know from physics class or pub trivia, that sound is what happens when the tip of the whip breaks the sound barrier, which means it is traveling faster than 750 mph, give or take. And in City Council, what we're seeing unfold is a direct reaction to that little sonic boom.

**Lieutenant Ryan:** The tip of the whip obviously breaks the sound barrier if used correctly. The integrity of the whip is compromised due to not being professionally constructed and the materials that they are made out of. The vast majority of the whips that we have seen in and around town are homemade. They use a variety of materials such as rope, string, chains, leather, to name a few.

**Fil:** Connelly wraps up the presentation with a slide of the proposed new ordinance. It would outlaw the possession of a whip on all public ground.

**Lieutenant Ryan:** This proposed ordinance will assist in keeping these areas safe and will significantly reduce these types of calls for service which will allow our officers to focus their efforts elsewhere in the community where they're needed.

[compelling music]

**Fil:** Though I had lived in downtown as the whips became ubiquitous, I never asked anybody about them. So, I began searching. A friend warned me that there was a code of silence around the whips, that the community was insular and on guard. And for several weeks, I failed constantly. I'd walk up and down the Truckee River through tent camps and vacant lots and with every approach, I'd be rejected. Or more often, I'd hear a whip in the distance only to arrive to an empty field or park minutes too late. But after about a month, I walked up to a group at a plaza in downtown. Most of them got their stuff and left but one person welcomed me over.

**Monica:** It's a hobby and we wrap them ourselves and they come together and we try each other's out.

**Fil:** This is Monica Plummer.

**Monica:** Usually, you get given one and then you have to make one and then you can start giving them away. You make one and give it away or whatever and you just pass it down.

**Fil:** Monica was barefoot, and as we spoke, she pulled a handmade red whip from her backpack. Observing these things from afar over the past few years, I had noticed a sort of aesthetic language. They often show bright colors, interesting textures and unlike a traditional bullwhip, they are not made of leather. Instead, they're made of repurposed old rope, tape, chain and on almost all of them, neon shades of nylon paracord.

You were just saying that the whips are something you can actually use for--

**Monica:** Colors, like when we're going down the trail in the nighttime or whatever because we don't like to be out during the day. We got to travel at night. We don't want all of our stuff out here. So, we travel the bike trail and there's skunks and raccoons and even snakes and, gosh, you name it. Well, we had a bear down here, you know what I'm saying? So, that crack is very useful to make them go away for sure.

**Fil:** At some point one of Monica's friends walked across the plaza and grabbed a huge blue whip from a guy's pack on the other side. It was over a dozen feet long.

[whip cracks]

**Fil:** You could hear a sort of short slap back echo off the church and the movie theater and this long quiet tale of reverberation.

[whip crack]

**Fil:** Then unexpectedly, in the distance from across the river, someone answered.

[whip crack]

**Fil:** A call and response.

[whip crack]

**Fil:** A window into this whole world began to open. Eventually, the second whipper walked over the bridge and hesitantly let me record his whip up close.

[whip crack]

**Fil:** It was an incredible sound. Clean, booming, and very loud.

[whip crack]

**Monica:** One has a different sound than the other and you can tell, like we can tell who's who just from the crack from down the river. It's amazing. You can really tell where your family's at and stuff.

**Fil:** Not only do these things deter skunks, Monica said, but they're also a communication device. They allow you to tell who's who from far away, which is a real asset for a community largely without cell phones. Reno, like a lot of American cities, has seen a devastating increase in houselessness in recent years. Homelessness almost tripled from 2015 to 2021, from 567 people to 1477. In that same time, the amount of people without any shelter increased 690%. It is, of course, a complicated, systemic problem, but at the core of it, the rent is too high. And exacerbating this problem here is a wave of demolition of affordable housing, which includes old motels, which have become the de facto last resort housing for low-income residents. Developers have been buying up these motels and clearing the land, seemingly with support from the city government and leaving behind dirt lots accompanied by online architectural renderings.

[electrical humming]

After this interview with Monica, I went back out looking for her. She didn't have a phone but said that I could find her at this plaza. I looked for several days, asking around, explaining I wasn't a cop walking a 10-mile stretch of river, but I never saw her again.

[electrical humming]

At the end of that 10-mile walk, I heard a crack. I followed it to the steps of the Methodist church, and that is when I met Nando for the very first time though I didn't yet know who he was.

[whip crack]

After reluctantly letting me record his whip, Nando agreed to an interview.

Do you mind if I sit here in between you guys? Do you make quite a few? Have you made a few of them?

**Nando:** I've made about 67 of them in the last past year.

**Fil:** That's a lot.

**Nando:** Yeah.

**Fil:** At this moment, it seemed like I had found exactly who I was looking for. An expert Downtown Reno whip maker. But one minute into the interview, before I even got his name, a car pulled up and the driver called Nando over.

**Nando:** Pretty much, I use them all until they stop working.

**Fil:** Yeah.

He paused, got in the car and said that he would be back. But he never came back.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** So begins weeks and weeks of searching. Stay tuned.

[upbeat music]

Welcome back to Snap Judgment, the Whip Law episode. And now, we're going to drop into Reno City Hall Public Comment because people-- well, people have got a lot to say. Snap Judgment.

**Council Member:** Madam Clerk, I'm going to send it to you right now for a roll call.

**Madam Clerk:** We're on item A3, which is public comment. If you're ready, I'll go ahead and move forward.

**Council Member:** Perfect. Thank you.

**Fil:** Reno City Hall is right in downtown. It's a black monolith of a building that overlooks the Truckee River and a large plaza where people practice whipping. Inside, council begins to hear public comment, but from what I can tell, there aren't any actual whippers speaking.

**Eric:** Good morning, Mayor Schieve, city council members. My name is Eric Lerude. I'm a Downtown Reno resident. I ask that you pass the proposed ordinance regarding whips. I frequently hear the whips cracking. I hear them from my home. I hear them when I'm out and about. They make a very scary noise. They basically sound like a gunshot.

**Female Reno Resident:** The whip cracking creates sonic booms, which rattled my windows, caused the seizures, caused my blinds to drop, caused the cat to run over the bed.

**Eric:** On one occasion, I was out walking with my wife and two visitors from out of town, and we encountered somebody with a whip. It was very frightening. The person was cracking the whip, we paused. And then we quickly went the other way, which was out of the way of which way we were going. It was a very frightening experience. It was very intimidating. It was very uncomfortable.

**Pro Whip Reno Resident:** Hello. I'm speaking in opposition of the whip ban. I mean, if there's an issue of them attacking people with the whips, that should be an assault thing, and there's already laws in place for that. So, why are we doing this? Why are we making criminals out of people over something that helps them?

**Holly:** My name is Holly Welborn. I'm the policy director for the ACLU of Nevada. It's a pleasure to be here this afternoon. The unsheltered population is overpoliced, lacks trust in law enforcement, and this ordinance threatens any efforts to build that trust.

**Anthony:** My name is Anthony Townsend, and I live just a couple of blocks from here, and I enjoy the public spaces. The last couple of years, it gets worse and worse. 03:00 AM in the morning, it's simulated gunfire. And it's a means of intimidation. I'm not one to make laws like the voting laws that we're coming up with around the country that are somewhat discriminatory, but I don't believe that's the case here. The people that are doing it, if you'll notice, they're almost 100% between 20 and 45 years old that are able bodied because it takes a reasonable amount of strength and dexterity to crack a 16-foot whip. But the police keep telling me they can't do anything about it because it's not considered a weapon.

**Amy:** Hello. My name is Amy. I have a vagrant living outside my door in the alleyway. If somebody could please take a look at this, have them removed? This is a shame that this is actually going on in this city, that these people have more rights than the citizens. Please have something done. Thank you.

**Fil:** After listening to public comment and that PDF presentation from the Reno Police Department, city council begins discussion. Here is council member, Naomi Duerr.

**Naomi:** I don't believe that artistic expression should interfere with people's quiet enjoyment of their property. Hey, if they're stressed, I get their stress. What can we do to help people besides get them housed and provide them with services to relieve some of this stress, if that's what it's about?

**Fil:** Council member, Oscar Delgado.

**Oscar:** A person purchased a whip somewhere, and they carried it from A to B. They're houseless. They can potentially be pulled over and ticketed. Is that what this is suggesting?

**Speaker:** Correct. If the mere possession in public--

**Oscar:** Okay, just want clarity. If somebody had a gun on them and they were houseless, would they also be ticketed?

**Person:** As long as it wasn't concealed, no.

**Oscar:** Someone can carry and not be cited with a misdemeanor with a gun, but they can't with the whip.

**Person:** Correct.

**Oscar:** Okay.

**Fil:** Reno mayor, Hillary Schieve.

**Hillary:** And I also think it's unfair that we say that this is something that the homeless are doing. I've seen people that are not homeless doing this, but I got to tell you, I think it's intimidating. I think it's absolutely dangerous. This is no way an art form. I'm sorry.

And council member, Jenny Brekhus.

**Jenny:** I don't like to presume who's homeless and who's not, because I don't think-- it's oftentimes not a good street discernment someone can make. But I've heard from the people for this ordinance and people with concerns for this ordinance that they understand the whip crackers to be people who are homeless. Is that like a universal given as we move forward with this?

**Fil:** Five hours into the meeting, despite some council members expressing wariness, they vote unanimously to advance this ordinance to a second hearing. It is not law yet, but it is one step closer.

[acoustic guitar music]

**Homeless Person:** This is rough. This is really rough. And it's really scary sometimes.

**Fil:** What do you mean by this? Like, being--

**Homeless Person:** Out here, homeless.

**Fil:** Houselessness in America is a complicated gradient. There are people on the streets, in shelters, sleeping in friends' houses, sedans, vans, RVs, tents. Even when people do get off the street into a weekly motel, they can still be considered homeless, especially if they're bouncing between the two. It's a boundary more porous than we'd like to admit. But in Reno, the whips seem to be this shared language that helps bind a loose and fluid community.

Does it make you feel safer to have one?

**Homeless Person:** Absolutely. I'm alone. I don't have a boyfriend or anything like that, so it's important for me to feel safe. And I don't have knives. I don't carry a knife. It's nice to know that my family is out here with me. And if I crack my whip, somebody will crack theirs.

**Hatchet:** Yeah, mine's just to get attention from everybody around that they know I'm in the area when I crack my whip. They call me Hatchet.

**Fil:** One autumn night, I hear a crack on the river. I head over the bridge and pick out two kids. One named Dusty has a bass guitar, and the other is named Hatchet. A whip is wrapped up under his arm.

**Hatchet:** Once it got started, it comes naturally, and it's addicting.

**Dusty:** They get real deep with it, like, man, all the different patterns. I didn't know that there's so many different knots you could do, and they tie so many. [crosstalk]

**Hatchet:** The community has little competitions and stuff and who could braid the fastest or who could braid different ways. Yeah, there's more to it than just cracking the whip.

**Fil:** I ask Hatchet what it feels like when he does crack it.

**Hatchet:** It's like me putting on music. When Imma mute my headphones and I have my whip in my hand, like telling me something, I'm just in the zone. Just like [unintelligible 00:27:32], I'm in the zone. Like I'm doing my thing. I pay attention to nothing besides the whip.

**Fil:** Do you think it's about power or control at all?

**Dusty:** Release.

**Hatchet:** Release, yes. It's more like releasing because it helps me when I get angry, when I get sad or something, I just pick up a whip. It helps me release it to where I'm not-- usually, I used to get physical with people and stuff getting when I get angry, but not anymore. Once I start doing the whip, cracking the whip, it released all that. It was crazy. It's like part of me now.

**Fil:** Yeah, well, because I mean, literally the way you break the sonic barrier is because the energy goes through your arm, through that and out that little string.

**Hatchet:** Yeah.

[engrossing music]

**Fil:** Do you know some of the best braiders and stuff? Do you have any favorites?

**Hatchet:** My best favorite braider would have to be Fernando. He braids the best.

**Dusty:** Yeah.

**Fil:** I hear this several times. The best in town is Nando. The guy who I got 50 seconds of interview with before he disappeared. At this point, I've been searching for him for about a month and have only caught glimpses from afar.

When we finish the interview, I ask Hatchett if I can record his whip. He takes a deep breath, looks around, and he enters the zone.

[whip cracks]

**Fil:** As Hatchet and Dusty fade into the night, tourists and locals stroll down the riverwalk. The wider reaction to the whips has been complicated. The idea of the Reno Whip Man briefly became a kind of absurdist folk hero on social media, with both appreciators and haters in the comments. In real life, some people grant a very wide berth to the whippers. Some call 911 and many just carry on as normal. It seems to be a heightened analog to the response to houselessness in general.

In the police presentation, Ryan Connelly claimed that the main reason they needed a new law was because they were getting flooded with 911 calls about whips and by people mistaking them for gunshots. Through a public records request, I was able to obtain about one hundred 911 audio files. It's about 4 hours' worth, but here are a handful of the highlights.

**Operator:** Dispatch. This is [unintelligible [00:30:16]. How may I help you?

**Matt:** Oh, hi. Thank you. My name is Matt. And I was just going to see if there's any chance an officer might be able to swing by. I know you guys are super busy, but on First and West Street, there's a guy that's been whipping the whip for probably three days. I thought after three days, it might get better, but tonight he's just going at it.

**Operator:** Sure. What’s your--[crosstalk]

**Matt:** [crosstalk]-gun shots.

**Female Speaker:** Hello, I'm calling from Arlington Towers downtown, and there's some whippers. They've been whipping for about a half an hour, so wondering if someone can come down to shut them up.

**Male Speaker:** Yeah. Can you hear me all right?

**Operator:** Yeah. What's the address of your emergency?

**Male Speaker:** Idlewild Park.

**Operator:** Okay, what's the phone number you're calling from?

**Male Speaker:** You can see the phone number. There's a man with a bullwhip out here. You need to send a cop out here. That’s going to--[crosstalk]

**Operator:** Okay. You have to confirm the phone number with you, sir, because it doesn't--[crosstalk]

**Male Speaker:** 9165 [beep]. I'm not going to go up and talk to him.

**Operator:** And about how old is he?

**Male Speaker:** I don't know. Does it matter? 20, 30?

**Operator:** I'm getting a description--

**Male Speaker:** Did you get the part of about the bullwhip?

**Operator:** Yes, I did--[crosstalk]

**Male Speaker:** Get a cop on the way.

**Operator:** Dispatch. This is [unintelligible [00:31:18]. How can I help you?

**Male Speaker:** I'm at Wingfield Park downtown, and there's somebody cracking a whip in the amphitheater area there.

**Operator:** I'm going to get some info in just a second. They're at the Wingfield Park at the amphitheater where the [crosstalk] stage is?

**Male Speaker:** Yeah, they've been cracking on the stage, and that's meant to be acoustic, so the crack just made me absolutely jump out of my skin.

**Operator:** 911, what's the address of your emergency?

**Male Speaker:** Problem is coming from the Wingfield Park with bullwhips sounding like gunshots all today, nonstop.

**Operator:** At Wingfield Park?

**Male Speaker:** Correct. In that little plaza there, where all the dirt bags are, that's where the bullwhip's coming from.

**Operator:** Did you get a description of the person?

**Male Speaker:** They're all the same. They're homeless people.

**Fil:** About a quarter of the 911 calls I obtained are from the same two apartment buildings, Arlington Tower and Park Tower, right in downtown. Listening through them, I start to recognize the voices. There are several repeat callers. One is a guy named Jeff.

**Operator: [00:32:31]** How many people--[crosstalk]

**Jeff:** Never in my life have I lived anywhere where it was a requirement for homeless people to have bullwhips. Unbelievable.

**Operator:** How many people are out there?

**Jeff:** I don't know. There's always a handful of these dirtbags in this area.

**Operator:** Are you only hearing it or are you seeing them?

**Jeff:** I'm hearing it. If I go down there and see it, I'm going to wrap it around his neck.

**Operator:** I wouldn't make threats like that on a recorded line, sir.

**Fil:** Jeff calls four times in a 10-day period. The first three specifically reference whips outside of his apartment. And then in the fourth, he calls 911 to report a dozen gunshots in the same location. This happens more than once in these two apartment buildings. People who have called 911 about the whips, then calmly calling 911 to report gunshots.

The escalation of human noise is a problem. It's bad for animal populations, bad for us and the whippers do take up a real chunk of sonic real estate. But things that are much louder to my ear, sirens, demolition equipment, cars with modified exhaust systems, motorcycles, none of these things seem to be as much of a lightning rod as the whips, if at all. The police, as far as I know, have not presented a PDF about the detrimental noise of their own helicopters.

Though it's also worth mentioning that it's not just housed people who are bothered by the whips. Some of the unsheltered people, especially the older folks I talked to, aren't fond of them either. One woman, Mary Gallegas, says that whip cracks make it hard for her to sleep. She invites me into her camp on the riverbank as she burns twigs of cottonwood.

How do you feel about them?

**Mary:** I do not like it myself. Kind of hoping that-- for what we heard that they're supposed to make it illegal or something. I hope.

**Fil:** Yeah, you hope so?

**Mary:** Yeah.

**Fil:** When I leave Mary's camp, sirens blare in the distance. Two people set up a tent on a flat spot nearby and tell me it doesn't matter where, the cops always wake them before dawn.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** When Snapchat returns, Fil continues his search for Nando. Stay tuned.

[upbeat music]

Welcome back to Snap Judgment. The Whip Law episode comes to us from our friend, Fil, at The Wind. And Fil is still looking for Nando. Snap Judgment.

**Fil:** On a cold December day, I returned to Nando's motel room with a bag of rope. I go to the room number he gave me, and when I knock on the door, it swings open at my touch, like out of a movie. It's a dark motel room filled with people on the bed, people on the floor, people who are not Nando. A man in bed seems unfazed by my entrance and says, nope, he ain't seen him. I close the door and wait, then leave, then search the river.

After our one-minute interview, I've spent days, weeks searching. I've waited hours in front of the church, given notes to people who know him. One night, a guy even offered to go find him, returning 45 minutes later alone. It begins to seem like I will never find this guy.

[dramatic music]

When I return to the motel, Nando appears. He takes the bag of rope. His wife, he says, is sleeping, and he tells me to come back later. When I come back the first time, somebody I don't recognize opens the door, tells me to buzz off to the Plaza, where Nando will meet me in an hour. I do. He doesn't. So, I return.

[dramatic music]

It's still windy and overcast, and when I knock this time, Nando lets me inside. It's a standard weekly motel room, spongy carpet, a kitchenette. There is a small screwdriver sticking out of the wall and tied around that is the beginning of a whip. My whip. I didn't just ask Nando to teach me. I also hired him to make me one in the process.

Can you kind of describe what you're doing right now?

**Nando:** Right now, I'm just braiding pretty much the overhaul of it, getting the base of it, form for the whip. Yeah, I actually started this one today. First, actually, I'm using pretty much the whole everything, the whole paracord.

**Fil:** I spend a lot of the interview asking about technique. Though people have told me in loose terms how to make them, definitely not the kind of details I could compare between whip makers.

And so, what's the braiding technique you're doing?

**Nando:** This one, this is a circle braid. This is a spiral. My whips last longer when I circle braid them.

**Fil:** In addition to braiding, I ask about cracking technique.

**Nando:** Whips are done by this hand movement, and then it's also done by weight. If it's light, you can't get it over your head, or you can't get it behind you. But the longer the whip, the longer the motion has to set. Like I said, it's like fly fishing.

**Fil:** Yeah. That's super interesting because I've seen you with your fly rod too. I mean, how do they compare?

**Nando:** Well, technically, actually, whip is more elbow, and then fly fishing is more of a wrist action. They all do the same thing though because fly fishing uses nylon string. That's your weight, that's your everything. So, you've got to get that out towards the river. This is the same thing. Nothing but paracord.

**Fil:** Yeah, they both taper.

**Nando:** Yeah, pretty much.

**Fil:** The fishing line or bullwhip has more mass at the base, so all of the energy you put into the handle accelerates as it passes through lighter and lighter material. This is how you get a fly way out into the river or how you get rope to break the sound barrier.

How did you get into making whips?

**Nando:** Well, I've been homeless. Well, I've been on the streets since I've been in Reno. I've been in Reno for 14 years. I got into it because I was homeless, and I've seen a friend, and I was like, at first, I didn't like it. I was like, "That's stupid. You're going to waste your time." But then, I was like, "Man, if you guys can make it, I bet I can make a better one," like competition. After that, I have ADHD, so my hands are always moving. This right here, constantly, you're moving up and down. It's fascinating that you can make something so long, give it weight, and all of a sudden, it's breaking the sound barrier. It's amazing.

[pensive music]

**Fil:** About two months after RPD's presentation on the whip ordinance, city council meets for a final vote.

**Council Member:** Ordinance adoption, ordinance number 6607, unlawful use of a whip together with other matters properly relating there too.

**Fil:** Though there is public comment on other houseless issues this week, namely the unsafe conditions at the city's new shelter, there is not much on whips. Seems to me that the city is poised to make this decision and that the advocates who typically speak on behalf of the unsheltered, see the writing on the wall. After all, this whole whip thing is just one small battle in a war with very high stakes and multiple fronts. When the whip ordinance comes up about eight hours into the meeting, there is a public comment left as a voicemail.

**Lisa:** This is Lisa, local resident of Reno, and I'm very concerned about the current atmosphere and the knee-jerk reactions going on with these horse whips. It's called a crop. They are used for the hind quarter of the horse, to move the horse out of tough situations such as the river, any kind of running water, rocky areas. They're important to have. To just suddenly ban them, it's silly. Being a horse rider and knowing many ranchers here in town, we're just appalled. I can't believe this. Please reconsider the decision. I cannot stress to you guys the value and the importance of retaining the horse crop for use in public service. Thank you.

**Fil:** What seems like a misunderstanding sets off an interesting exchange between council member, Jenny Brekhus, and city attorney, Karl Hall.

**Jenny:** I did not think the ordinance was going to come back geographically described. I thought it was going to be citywide. Can you explain why it came back with geographic boundaries and how those were selected?

**Karl:** Yes. The reason it was restricted geographically is because that's where we were receiving reports of use of these whips in the downtown area. As we just had the public comment, areas outside of the downtown area, there may be uses for whips, but we were getting all the complaints downtown, so this ordinance is addressing the issue that was presented through the police department to address people cracking the whip downtown, threatening people with whips downtown, intimidating people with whips downtown area and that's why it's geographically restricted.

**Fil:** This reminds me of something Brekhus asked back in the very first meeting. Here she is speaking to Lieutenant Ryan Connelly in August.

**Jenny:** But I've heard from the people for this ordinance and people with concerns for this ordinance that they understand the whip crackers to be people who are homeless. Is that like a universal given as we move forward with this?

**Lieutenant Ryan:** I wouldn't say it's a given. Like the stats indicated, large majority of the calls for service related to whips are in central district, but they're also citywide. We have whip calls from every district, every ward, every--[crosstalk]

**Jenny:** Okay.

**Fil:** And yet, the final ordinance is not citywide, but instead a whip ban that draws a box around downtown and largely around the houseless population.

**Jonathan:** What it does is it makes it illegal to possess a whip in that corridor area.

**Fil:** That is assistant city attorney, Jonathan Shipman. In short, this is not about people with horses like Lisa. This is about the mostly unhoused community in downtown who have turned bullwhips into a shared hobby. It's about the space they've begun to take up physically. And in this case, sonically.

**Jonathan:** If you've got a horse in your down south, that's totally fine and fair, and you're not going to be penalized for using that whip. Again, it really gets the problem is the downtown. The problem is we have whips cracking downtown, sounds like gunshots, people report gunshots. That activity has got to stop, and we don't expect to see that outside of the downtown corridor area.

**Fil:** With no further discussion, council member, Naomi Duerr, makes a motion.

**Naomi:** I would like to make a motion that we adopt this ordinance in F2 as written.

**Council Members:** Second.

**Council Member:** All those in favor say aye.

**Council Members:** Aye.

**Council Member:** Opposed.

**Jenny:** Opposed.

**Naomi:** The motion carries with a no vote by council member, Brekhus.

**Council Member:** All right, Madam Vice Mayor, moving on to item G1, which is--

**Fil:** The law passes 6-1. Whips are now illegal in Downtown Reno.

**Nando:** A lot of us, we live downtown. I mean, homeless, we live downtown. It is what it is. We don't have the means to go all the way out to the country and all that.

**Fil:** Getting into this world, I had this assumption that the whips were about power. Unhoused people reclaiming of the control that society would no longer afford them. On several occasions I was told, no, it's not about power. It's about release. Something heavy and interior being exerted, shed, accelerated, and let out.

**Nando:** I feel like each time I make a whip, I lose a piece of my soul. Not for the bad and not like I'm going to die. When I do go one day, if my whips are still around, if they're not in waste management, in the garbage, I'm still going to be here. Because each whip, this one right here, when you take this one when I'm done with it, my spirit is in this. A piece of my soul goes. I grow a new soul. All the time I've had on the streets and everything I've been through, all the bad gets put into these whips. I become a new me each time. My name is Fernando Tate. I've been here for about 14 years, and I plan on staying for a little bit longer, and I'm damn sure about to keep on cracking my whips and making them.

**Fil:** When Nando finishes my whip, it's 14ft long and varying shades of green. He brings it out and cracks it in front of his motel, and it makes an illegal sound echoing through all of Downtown Reno.

[somber music]

On a reporting trip in early November, I spent several hours walking up and down the river with no luck. On my way back, a younger guy in the park cracks a short whip. He stops and sits on a stone table, and I approach him. He agrees to an interview but says no recording. He picks up a nylon bag from the bench filled with whip-making supplies. It's the only thing he's carrying with him. 08:00 PM, it's a cold night, and the park is dead silent.

He pulls out a larger, uncompleted whip from the bag. It's wrapped haphazardly in black and purple rope, and it has a metal hook protruding from the bottom. He shows me how this lets him wrap the whip and put it away in seconds, kind of like those plastic hooks on a vacuum cleaner. Now that whips are illegal, it seems that this might become a necessary new feature.

[somber music]

He says his name is Spooks, and he's probably around 20 years old, maybe younger. He's been working on this whip all day, and the repetitive action of wrapping and braiding calms him, "which I needed today," he says, "I dealt with some stuff today, real bad stuff." I ask him why he does it. "Whips are about communicating with each other, sure, but it's more than that too." As he twirls and snakes it back and forth, he says, "See this? This is all me. That's my energy flowing through it. I can take every stressor, every bad feeling, and I can put it into this whip, all the way through." He swings his arm, lifts it above his head, fluidly waves it towards the fork in the river, "And I can [whip cracks]. It breaks the sound barrier," he says, but it's more than that. It breaks-- I don't know how to say this, but it breaks realities.

[somber music]

A couple of months after this story originally aired, Reno's best whip maker, Fernando Tate, died. He was 31 years old.

[somber music]

**Glynn:** This episode was produced by Fil Corbett for their podcast, The Wind. The Wind, just made at a handmade desk in the Sierra Nevada. Search for The Wind wherever you listen to podcasts. The music for this episode was written specifically for this piece. The original score composed and performed by Emily Pratt, who makes music under the name, Howls Road. This final song was by Yclept Insan. You can hear Emily Pratt's full soundtrack, plus photos of the whips and much more at *thewind.org/snap*. Thank you to Emily Pratt, to Mike Corbitt, and Anjeanette Damon for advice and support on this piece. Thank you.

[somber music]

Now, I know you want more stories.

[upbeat music]

There is so much more Snap where this came from. Available at your fingertips wherever you get your podcast. Snap is on Twitter, on Instagram, on Facebook.

And this, this is not the news. No way is this the news. In fact, when they come to arrest you for carrying a whip, just say, "No, no, Mr. Officer. This isn't a whip. This is my lasso [whip cracks] because I'm a cowboy." And you would still, still not be as far away from the news as this is. But this is PRX.

Snappers, a small army of producers, researchers, editors, musicians, and makers are behind each and every story you hear on Snap judgment, crafted with love and with care, by people who love and who care. This show is made of magic. But we are not immune to the wave of layoffs and cancellations sweeping public media.

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