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OPINION

# Letter from the Editor: Our journalists spent vital time with neighbors caught in protest crossfire

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Gray's Landing resident Mindan Ocon records the scene below her apartment after federal officers deploy tear gas on protesters gathered at the South Portland ICE facility after the No Kings rally on Saturday, Oct. 18. Kristine de Leon/The Oregonian/OregonLive



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By [Laura Gunderson](#) | [The Oregonian/OregonLive](#)

One of the best parts about being a reporter is when we go places that the general public doesn't typically get to experience.

Such opportunities can help us hold powerful people and institutions accountable or allow us to share unique information or perspectives with readers.

That was the case for health reporter Kristine de Leon who aimed to tell the stories of residents at Gray's Landing, the affordable housing complex with a front row seat to the protests at the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement facility in South Portland.

Since last summer, several of our reporters have published stories about the issues Gray's Landing residents have faced: Tear gas floating into their balconies and open windows, flash bang grenades booming into the wee hours, intense spotlights pointed at the crowds but creating ambient light that's hard to block. Helicopters, drones, megaphones and unrelenting tension.

But as far as we knew, no reporters had attempted to experience it for themselves.

It was an important story because it could help illustrate the nuanced scene in South Portland. While there are protesters who are crocheting and wearing inflatable costumes, there are also small groups of rude folks from both sides who scream obscenities nonstop and sometimes appear to be itching for a fight. Still, protesters' turnout and destruction are far less than in 2020 and the city is by no means "war-ravaged" or on fire as President Donald Trump claims.

But it's a nerve-wracking situation for people who live and work there.

De Leon first interviewed a resident as she helped cover our recent story logging 24 hours at the ICE facility. She kept in touch with Lashawnda Shavers over the next few weeks by phone.

Finally, in the week leading up to the No Kings rally on Oct. 18, she visited Shavers again and broached the topic of hanging out that Saturday when a large, post-march protest was expected.

"She's one of the many residents who seems to be frustrated, who feel hopeless living there," de Leon said. "They're trying to live there, just caught in the middle."

De Leon knew she needed to tread carefully. She talked with her editor about how to tell the story without adding to the challenging circumstances residents there already face.

"I tried to put myself in these peoples' shoes," she said, "This was a big ask. These are people who already have had their privacy compromised with these large beams of light shining in their windows. They have a sense of being surveilled with officers on the ICE buildings staring into their apartments and drones flying by.

"I felt like I could just add to that," she said. "Going in I knew it could feel I was invading their space, so when I approached, I just let them know how really grateful I was."

De Leon worried Shavers might change her mind. Some of her neighbors weren't interested in being a part of the story. They feared being doxxed or targeted if they participate because – unlike other protesters - people can watch them walk home. Some would like to ask why the police or the city aren't doing more to help them, but they're also worried about saying anything that could jeopardize the subsidized housing they waited on long, competitive lists to get.

It's complicated. For us to do our job well, we need people to be on the record – especially now when it's become routine to question journalists' objectivity and truth-telling.

But we're also careful to consider our sources. De Leon had debated knocking on a lot of doors in the building to hear a range of comments and experiences. However, she changed her mind after realizing that could unduly alarm people and put them on the spot.

“We wanted to hear their real, visceral experiences because this is about living with the chemicals and the noise and the disturbances,” said Margaret Haberman, de Leon's editor. “But we didn't want to push anybody into anything.”

Shavers ended up introducing de Leon to some of her friends and neighbors who were comfortable talking. The neighbors have become close through the difficult summer and often check on each other after booming flash bangs that rattle the building.

“Kristine kind of doubled as an observer and a foil,” Haberman said. “They just wanted to talk. They were happy having somebody listen to them – to hear how they feel that they are collateral damage.”

De Leon and photographer Abigail Landwehr arrived at Gray's Landing at 4 p.m. and left around 1:30 a.m., when the crowds had quieted down.

She took a week to carefully craft her story. She exchanged several drafts with Haberman and said she worried throughout about selecting the best anecdotes and accurately capturing the residents' intense feelings.

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#### **Laura Gunderson**

Her work as editor was built on a foundation of more than 30 years at The Oregonian, where she started in sports and moved on to cover education, politics, retail and public safety, wrote a popular consumer... more

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