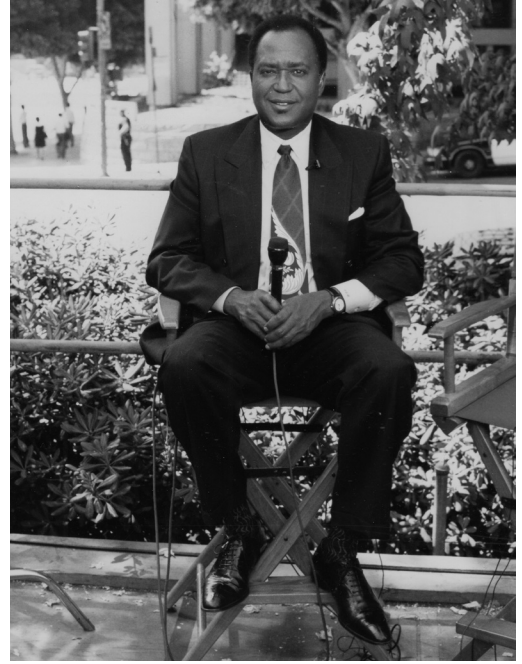


## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## New PBS documentary explores the life of Civil Rights Attorney John Burris and his ongoing quest to seek justice for victims of police brutality

(BERKELEY) John Burris' road to becoming a civil rights attorney took several interesting turns before he found his way into an area of law that had practically been unexplored (police litigation). While a student at UC Berkeley's School of Law back in the early 1970s, John worked as a summer intern in Chicago, where he learned firsthand about police brutality within the notorious Chicago Police Department. His job was to interview victims for Congressman Ralph Metcalf's Commission on Police Misconduct. "After that early experience in Chicago, I often wondered if that type of activity was happening anywhere else," said Attorney John Burris.

*John Burris: Godfather of Police Litigation*, is a PBS documentary that will premiere at 7pm Saturday, February 8, 2025, at UC Berkeley's International House. The documentary was produced and directed by Berkeley filmmaker Doug Harris and features a rich cast of prominent members of the Bay Area's legal and political communities. "When I first decided to take this project on, I had no idea about what I was getting myself into," comments Filmmaker Doug Harris. "I learned quickly that John Burris has had a huge impact on police litigation across the entire country. I've been fortunate to have compiled all these different perspectives of his life from a celebrated group of cast members into this exciting documentary film."



[click to view documentary preview trailer](#)

John Burris' story is similar in many ways to a lot of students who enter college not really knowing what they seek to become in life. His college path started at Solano Junior College in Vallejo, then undergraduate studies at Golden Gate University in San Francisco, and on to UC Berkeley where he received his master's degree in business. After working in the corporate world as an accountant for two years, he decided that wasn't the road he wanted to take in life. So he decided to return to UC Berkeley to attend law school where he would earn his JD degree in 1973, and begin to make his mark in the legal field. "Starting out, I didn't know what type of lawyer I was going to be, I thought frankly that criminal law was the law that you did as a civil rights lawyer," says Burris.

After serving stints as a prosecutor in Chicago and the Alameda County District Attorney's office, John decided to venture into an uncharted area of law that few would dare take a risk on. Two weeks after leaving Alameda County, he took on a case that would change the course of his legal career forever. In 1979, 15 year old Melvin Black was brutally shot and killed by the Oakland Police, sending the entire community into an uproar. This was the beginning of his quest as a civil rights attorney to seek justice for a growing list of police misconduct victims.

The turning point in John Burris' career came in 1994 when he successfully represented Rodney King in the civil trial against the Los Angeles Police Department, when television viewers around the country saw video footage of the terrible beating by LAPD police officers. "One of the things that amazes me the most about John's story, is the amount of archival news footage that I've been able to use in putting this documentary together. John was one of the first lawyers to effectively use the television news media to raise awareness for many of his cases, and that alone makes him a pioneer," says Producer/Director Doug Harris.

Several of John Burris' landmark cases were instrumental in the country's social justice movement starting with the Oakland Riders case, and the 2009 Oscar Grant BART police case in Oakland with community protests that birthed the national Black Lives Matter movement. Also in 2015, Burris' Mario Woods case against the San Francisco Police Department's brutal killing became the cause for SF 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick to kneel in protest during the national anthem at NFL games during the national anthem of the brutal police killing.

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A key focus of John Burris' documentary is the mentorship he has provided to a list of younger civil rights lawyers over the years. One in particular is Attorney Ben Crump, who has taken a page out of the Burris playbook by bringing national media attention to many of his police brutality cases that include the tragic deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Breonna Taylor, Tyre Nichols and George Floyd to name just a few. "The thing that I appreciate about John is his tenacious mentality. He's not going to let them (the police) sweep it under the rug. We're going to keep subpoenaing information, pursue every legal avenue possible to get justice," says Attorney Ben Crump.

Within the scope of the criminal justice system, police misconduct cases are often times the most difficult to prosecute, and in particular the officer involved shooting cases ending in death. In December 2023, the U.S. Department of Justice launched the National Law Enforcement Accountability Database (NLEAD), a centralized repository of official records documenting instances of police misconduct put in place under Attorney General Merrick B. Garland. Similar to the 2000 National Decertification Index (NDI), NLEAD was put in place to have a national tracking of police officers in the bad policing category who have caused harm to victim's families and the community.

Burris' tireless work and that of other civil rights attorneys could be in jeopardy with incoming President Donald Trump's plans for a complete overhaul of the Department of Justice. In a 2024 presidential campaign rally speech in Wisconsin, Donald Trump was quoted "We're gonna give our police their power back, and we're gonna give them immunity from prosecution. So they're not prosecuted for doing their job." According to a Washington Post analysis, over 1,000 people a year are killed by police, so President Trump could now be emboldening police around the country to commit even more atrocious violence. "This should send shivers to the backs of the black and brown communities as they are far more likely to be killed by the police," states John Burris. "It is my hope that there will be lawyers willing to challenge Trump's intent to give federal immunity to rogue police officers, and to be aggressive advocates for the civil rights of the people."

The 90-minute documentary features a cast that includes Willie Brown, Thelton Henderson, Elihu Harris, London Breed, Phil Matier, Ben Crump, Joe Cotchett, Leigh Steinberg, Pamela Price, and Erwin Chemerinsky along with many others. ***(Click photo to view documentary preview)***

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