

Local fire crews are deployed as blazes explode across NorCal

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Tiburon Fire Protection District crews were deployed last week to the Woodward Fire in the Point Reyes National Seashore, which was sparked by lightning Aug. 18 and has since burned more than 2,000 acres of rugged land there.

The fire was one of more than 500 burning across the state, which have destroyed more than 1 million acres and include the second and third largest in California history.

A Tiburon fire crew and fire engine were first deployed about 1:30 p.m. Aug. 17 to a smaller "Fire 4-5" in Point Reyes. The team included Lt. Mark Fitzgerald and firefighters Omar Bell, Patrick Gallagher and Ryan Mock. The Woodward Fire has since engulfed the "Fire 4-5" burn zone.

An additional crew and fire engine were deployed at

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Tiburon extends weekend closures of Main Street through Halloween

Residents can dine and shop outdoors on vehicle-free street amid pandemic

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With strong encouragement from several local business owners, the Tiburon Town Council has extended the town's weekend closures of lower Main Street by nearly two months, through Oct. 31.

After a unanimous vote by the council at its Aug. 19 teleconference meeting, lower Main Street between Fountain Plaza and the traffic circle near the entrance to the Main Street Parking Lot will remain car-free from Friday afternoons through 8 p.m. Sundays until

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Store owners: Late-night encounter with Tiburon police motivated by race



SCREENGRAB FROM VIDEO VIA @YEMACALIF, INSTAGRAM

Tiburon police supervising Sgt. Michael Blasi and Yema Khalif, the co-owner of Main Street fashion boutique Yema, engage in a heated exchange about 1 a.m. Aug. 21 after the initiating officer (out of frame) called for backup. The encounter was partly recorded in a 6-minute viral video uploaded to Khalif's Instagram and Facebook pages. At left, after Khalif repeatedly asserts he's the store owner, they argue about whether Khalif is required to prove it. Minutes later, at right, Blasi orders Khalif to insert his key in the shop's door as proof. Within seconds, a Main Street resident yells down that Khalif is the owner, which Blasi says is 'all I needed to know' as he walks away.

By **HANNAH WEIKEL**
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A video showing three Tiburon Peninsula police officers repeatedly questioning the identity of a Black business owner working in his Fountain Plaza clothing store about 1 a.m. Aug. 21 has sparked widespread outrage within the community and prompted town officials to order an independent investigation into the conduct of two of the officers.

A 6-minute video of the incident was posted to Instagram and Facebook by Yema Khalif, the co-owner of the "action fashion wear" boutique Yema at 10 Main St. In it, the

watch online

The video posted by store owner Yema Khalif of his encounter with Tiburon Sgt. Michael Blasi can be viewed at [instagram.com/yemacalif](https://www.instagram.com/yemacalif).

officers, who first note that Khalif is in the store at 1 a.m., past the typical 9 p.m. shut-down time for activity on the street, can be heard repeatedly demanding that Khalif prove his ownership of the business, either by showing identification or putting his key in the shop's door. Khalif continually declines to do so, stating numerous times that

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- Mayor says actions 'unacceptable,' town will seek independent investigation
- Cops demanded Black couple provide proof they own Main Street boutique Yema as they restocked inventory at 1 a.m.
- Interior was lighted, no alarms had sounded, no calls placed for suspicious activity
- Officer apparently already called for backup before initiating contact
- Couple, who design and model their fashions, are featured prominently on several posters visible inside store
- Confrontation ends only when resident in Main Street apartment yells down to vouch for owners
- Community expresses outrage as video of incident goes viral online
- Other shop owners say they've never been questioned for working well into the night
- Encounter comes amid nationwide calls for police de-escalation — and on heels of chief's controversial statements about Black Lives Matter protest in Marin City



HIGH-END REMODELS & NEW CONSTRUCTION



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he owns the business and asks, “What’s the problem? There are three Black people in the store — what’s the problem with that?”

The heated exchange, which began shortly after 1 a.m. Aug. 21, was partially recorded from inside the store by Khalif’s friend while his partner and store co-founder, Hawi Awash, stood back from the door. The recording shows a Tiburon officer, identified as supervising Sgt. Michael Blasi, becoming more frustrated and confrontational with Khalif, who also appears exasperated with the interaction, as the minutes go by.

“Put your key in the door and we’re out of here. If this is your store, put the key in the door,” Blasi can be heard saying.

Just seconds later, the interaction ended abruptly when a neighbor who lives farther down Main Street yelled from his balcony to confirm Khalif was the owner. That seemed to satisfy the officers, and they promptly left — without the proof they had demanded for roughly 10 minutes.

The video — which has been viewed more than 30,000 times on the store’s Instagram page and shared more than 750 times on its Facebook page — triggered an overwhelming community response of concern and outrage, including hundreds of comments on online neighborhood forum Nextdoor.com. A Change.org petition, signed by nearly 500 people by The Ark’s press deadline, called for the immediate suspension of Blasi and an investigation into the officers involved.

Mayor Alice Fredericks on Aug. 22 sent out an email to the community apologizing to Khalif and Awash.

“Whatever the intention of the responding officers, the interchange inappropriately deteriorated from helpful to confrontational,” Fredericks said in the statement, adding that Tiburon officers are trained and expected to de-escalate situations such as these. “It is clear that did not occur in this instance.”

While Tiburon Police Chief Michael Cronin and Town Manager Greg Chanis have ordered an independent investigation into the incident, the results of which will be reviewed by the Town Council, Cronin said neither Blasi nor the two other officers involved would be suspended or put on administrative leave amid the investigation.

Cronin declined to identify the other two officers other than to say one works for Tiburon and the other for Belvedere.

The Aug. 21 incident is the second time in recent months the Tiburon Police Department has come under public scrutiny for its response to racial issues in the wake of the Memorial Day killing of George Floyd and ensuing Black Lives Matter protests across the country, including several in Tiburon.

After Floyd’s death and ahead of a peaceful June 2 protest in Marin City, Cronin sparked outrage among the community after he issued a statement warning residents to be wary should the demonstration become violent or lead to looting on the Tiburon Peninsula — neither of which happened. Community members pointed out Cronin had only issued a warning for the protest in Marin City, which is 61 percent non-white, including 38 percent Black, and had issued no such warnings for similar peaceful protests in other nearby predominantly white communities, including Mill Valley.

Cronin quickly apologized, saying he stood in support of peaceful protests in Marin City and condemned racism, social injustice and police brutality. The department also updated its use-of-force policy to align with calls to de-escalate police encounters with the public.

In an Aug. 24 interview, Khalif said he had no doubt the officers confronted him because of his race and said he was “still traumatized.”

“I could have been another statistic, I could have been another George Floyd, Trayvon Martin, but I did not take the bait,” he said. “The next day when I woke up, I was like, ‘Holy s—, what just happened?’”

‘I don’t have to show anything to you’

Both Khalif and Awash said they noticed a Tiburon police



ELLIOT KARLAN ARCHIVE / FOR THE ARK 2020

Tiburon resident Hawi Awash (left), who co-owns athleisure brand and boutique Yema at the corner of Tiburon Boulevard and Main Street, helps a customer on June 14. Awash and partner Yema Khalif design all the clothing and serve as models for their brand, with posters of the pair together in their distinctive fashions lining the walls of their shop (background and below). Awash, Khalif and a friend were restocking inventory at 1 a.m. Aug. 21 when a Tiburon police officer reportedly circled the block several times, called for backup and confronted the three, asking them to prove they were allowed inside. After a heated 10-minute encounter, police only left when a Main Street resident yelled down that Khalif was the owner.



VIA @YEMACALIF, INSTAGRAM

car driving slowly by their storefront while they were working inside with their friend about 1 a.m. Aug. 21. Khalif said the officer circled the store three or four times before stopping outside the shop and sitting across the street for about 15 minutes.

The couple was working late with a friend and business associate from Washington, D.C., Awash said, adding that it’s not uncommon for them to work late into the night setting up displays and doing inventory. Awash noted they had been in the shop until about 2 or 3 a.m. the day before.

Tiburon police records show that no one called police about suspicious activity at the store, and no alarms had been set off.

While the interaction with the first officer at the scene, who has not been identified, was not recorded, Khalif said the officer walked up to the door and immediately “demanded” to know what they were doing in the store at night.

Khalif recalled saying, “you came here because you saw

three Black people in the store.”

Awash also noted the tone of the officer, saying he came off “a little bit aggressive and suspicious.” She said he didn’t identify himself or ask if they were working late.

“It was more like, ‘Who are you guys, what are you doing in this store, you must identify yourselves and prove why you are here,’” she said.

Khalif said when it became clear the officer wasn’t understanding him, he asked the officer to call his supervisor. According to Khalif, the officer responded that he had already called for backup before Khalif made the request.

After a few minutes, Blasi and another officer arrived, which is when the interaction starts being recorded. Blasi begins asking the same questions as the first officer, including what the three were doing there late at night.

“This street closes at 9 o’clock at night, and there’s never anybody in here. This isn’t regular business hours, there’s no customers in here. Is it your store? That’s all we want to know,” Blasi says.

“If I tell you it’s my store, then what?” Khalif asks in the video.

“Then show me it’s your store,” Blasi responds.

“I don’t have to show anything to you,” Khalif can be heard saying.

The argument continued for a few more minutes, with both Blasi and Khalif raising their voices.

In a later interview, Awash pointed out that there are large posters on the store’s walls of both she and Khalif modeling their clothing. Khalif said he was wearing the same outfit as the mannequin he was standing next to while talking to police from the doorway.

In the video, Blasi eventually says Khalif “should be grateful” that the officers are looking out for his shop.

“The next time I come here and there are three totally different people in here — I don’t care what color they are — three people in your store at 3 o’clock in the morning, do you want us to walk by and not do anything?” Blasi said.

As the recorded interaction passes the 5-minute mark, a neighbor farther down Main Street came out onto his balcony and yelled at the officers that Khalif was the owner of the store.

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“Thank you very much, that’s all I need to know,” Blasi said in the video and walked away toward Tiburon Boulevard. The first officer stayed behind briefly and again asked Khalif to put his key in the door, though Khalif again declined, saying the matter was settled.

The neighbor, Ken Simpson, lives in his Main Street apartment part-time and said he’s also accustomed to hearing noise from patrons and employees of downtown restaurants late at night, but the yelling that woke him up about 1:15 a.m. Aug. 21 sounded like it was escalating quickly.

“It sounded like a fist-fight was going to happen,” Simpson said. “I opened our balcony door to Main Street, and I heard one of the officers saying, ‘If this is your store, put your key in the door and prove it.’”

Simpson, who is familiar with Khalif, said he was concerned by the way the three officers were surrounding him, so he yelled down to confirm Khalif was the owner.

“How they don’t know Yema is beyond me,” he said. “It looked like they were harassing him and I thought, ‘This has gone on for several minutes.’ It just felt like it was going to progress into something ugly.”

Khalif called the fact that the situation was diffused by a white neighbor yelling down to vouch for him “the icing on the cake.”

“A Black man cannot be in this space in this particular hour and say, ‘I’m OK, no need to be talking to you, move along. A Black man can not say that, but a white man can.’”

On Aug. 21, Khalif issued a statement on the company’s Facebook page explaining what had happened early that morning.

“I confirmed that I am the business owner, but they wanted me to prove it. They refused to leave until I proved it,” Khalif said in the post. “Everything I was saying fell on deaf ears.”

He went on to say that both he and Awash have been stopped numerous times by Tiburon police, both in their cars and walking down the street.

“I have been stopped for taking a walk to my house. I had to prove my house, street and number, and I had to prove that I lived in Tiburon,” Khalif said.

Meanwhile, Awash estimated she has been stopped in her car three to five times over the past year and a half by the same police officer.

“We do not need to prove why we need to exist,” Khalif said. “We do not need to prove to police that we deserve to be at our clothing store way past business hours.”

Khalif, who has lived in Tiburon for nearly 10 years, and Awash are well-known in the Tiburon business community. They opened the athletic apparel boutique in February. Several months later, the store was named Tiburon’s Business of the Month. Khalif was also a speaker at the 2018 Belvedere-Tiburon Library’s Pop-Up 94920 series.

Before opening their Tiburon storefront, the couple started selling their clothing online in 2016. A percentage of all sales are donated to Road to Freedom Scholarships for the education of orphaned children in Ethiopia and Kenya, a program that was started by Danish actress and part-time Tiburon resident Connie Nielsen. Nielsen

“This street closes at 9 o’clock at night, and there’s never anybody in here. This isn’t regular business hours, there’s no customers in here. Is it your store? That’s all we want to know.”

— Tiburon police Sgt. Michael Blasi to Yema owner Yema Khalif about 1 a.m. Aug. 21

met Khalif on a movie set and later helped him move to California, where he attended Dominican University of California in San Rafael, made the dean’s list all four years, was his class valedictorian in 2015 and was offered a full scholarship into its MBA program, where he eventually obtained his master’s. His accomplishment was widely covered in the TV and print media, including in *The Ark*.

Khalif, who designs most of the company’s clothing, grew up in the Kibera slums of Nairobi, Kenya. Awash was born in Ethiopia and lived as a refugee in Kenya before moving with her family to Minnesota. The couple met at Dominican University.

Calls for investigation

In an interview Aug. 24, Fredericks called the officers’ behavior “unacceptable,” and said the Police Department is in the process of hiring an attorney to conduct an independent investigation into the incident. At the conclusion of the investigation, the findings will be presented to her and the rest of the Tiburon Town Council.

In addition, Fredericks said the council plans to hold a special meeting within the next week to discuss the incident, though a date and time was not set by *The Ark*’s press time.

“We are focused on how to prevent this from happening again,” she said.

Fredericks said Cronin is planning a department-wide racial-bias training for late next month, which has been in the works since the George Floyd killing in Minneapolis in May, which led to widespread protests and mounting calls to end racial injustice and police brutality.

Cronin declined to directly comment on the Aug. 21 incident until the investigation has concluded, but he confirmed Blasi and the other officers involved would continue coming to work through the investigation.

“I do not have any intention of removing them at this time,” Cronin said.

Blasi was hired last year by the department after more than 15 years at the Marin County Sheriff’s Office as a SWAT team leader, investigator and gang task-force officer. In 2004, Blasi was one of the deputies involved in a wrongful death lawsuit after a 47-year-old man named Cary Grime was arrested and hogtied in Novato. During the arrest, Grime fell unconscious and died in the hospital two days later. The county settled with Grime’s family for nearly \$1 million.

Cronin said he wasn’t aware of Blasi’s involvement in the Grimes case when the department hired him last year.

“He went through the normal background check,” Cronin said. “I was not specifically aware of that event.”

First hired by the Belvedere Police Department in 2017, Blasi is considered a

“A Black man cannot be in this space in this particular hour and say, ‘I’m OK, no need to be talking to you, move along.’ A Black man can not say that, but a white man can.”

— Yema owner Yema Khalif on Aug. 24, noting police only left his business when a white neighbor yelled down to vouch for him

supervisor in Tiburon, where he earns an annual salary of \$99,888 with a \$20,324 benefits package.

Blasi has responded to numerous law enforcement-related questions on Quora, a question-and-answer website, over the last few years.

In one response, Blasi explained that police are not able to detain a person without a lawful, articulable reason and compel them to identify themselves.

In another post, Blasi is asked what kind of behavior can get someone in trouble with the police, to which he responded, “resisting a detention or arrest” and “failing to identify yourself or providing ID when directed by an officer.”

He also says he wouldn’t recommend anyone become a police officer in today’s environment, citing “media and social-media scrutiny, internet armchair quarterbacks evaluating every real-time decision (and) unqualified and incompetent civilian-oversight committees that are usually someone’s bulls— political agenda.”

Khalif and Awash said Chanis, the town manager, reached out to them after the incident, and the three met on Aug. 23.

Awash characterized the conversation as positive.

“We all want this to resolve in a positive way,” she said, noting she hopes the incident sparks conversation about “police reform and real policing that uses empathy to police our community.”

She said that included conversations about how police officers can re-examine their implicit biases and eliminate their own fear on the job.

“They’re the ones with the guns, they’re the ones with the badge, they’re the ones with the authority,” she said. “What is it that they’re fearing?”

Khalif and Awash said Cronin had not reached out to them directly in the aftermath of the incident. Khalif said Fredericks came by the shop on Aug. 24, two days after she had sent out her email statement extending her “heartfelt apologies” to the couple.

Khalif said he wasn’t particularly impressed with that statement.

“We are not interested in blanket apologies that have no honesty and truth and actionable things that will prevent a situation like this from happening to the next Black man,” he said. “That’s where the concern should be right now — the next Black man, not an apology to Yema.”

Community expresses outrage

After the video of the incident was posted on Yema’s Instagram and went viral, discussion caught like wildfire across social media platforms.

One of several discussion threads on Nextdoor.com had racked up 234 com-

ments by the Ark’s press deadline. Nearly all the comments expressed outrage with Tiburon police with calls to hold the officers accountable.

“Accountability for our actions is something that everyone should want, doubly so from public servants whose job is to keep us safe,” wrote Nate Lee, a Tiburon resident. “It was saddening to see that there wasn’t any recognition from the police involved that this was a situation where they made a mistake.”

Tiburon resident Nicole Wolf said she would like town officials to take it a step further and fire the officers in the video, as well as Cronin.

“This incident should alarm every resident in Tiburon,” wrote Wolf. “I can no longer sit idle and watch the (Tiburon Police Department) inhumanely treat the citizens and business owners of our town. As a community, we need to demand change in our public servants when it becomes clear their own unrecognized prejudices can no longer allow them to protect and serve all residents.”

Other downtown business owners rallied around the couple, saying they’ve never been questioned by police while working late into the evening, past closing time, including Chelsea Ialeggio, a real-estate agent who said she has had offices in town with both Frank Howard Allen and now at Vanguard Properties.

“I think of all of the very late nights I have worked in those offices and never once did the police come by to see who was there as I sat at my desk clearly visible in the window,” she wrote in a citizen complaint to Cronin that was shared with *The Ark*. “Maybe because I am a blonde Caucasian, there was no reason that they cared to check on why I was there or felt the need to make me get out my key to prove I belonged there.”

Still, other locals questioned Khalif’s reaction to the police, and said he should have proved ownership when asked.

“Doesn’t the business owner have some responsibility for not complying, which also could’ve de-escalated the situation?” asked Reedlands resident Elizabeth Shapiro on Nextdoor. “If they had just proved it was their business then that would’ve been it.”

However, Linda Emberson of Tiburon countered Shapiro’s comment.

“Why would the police believe some white guy yelling from his balcony and not the Black business owner stating he owned the business?” she wrote. “If you can’t see a problem here then you’re blind or indifferent.”

Awash said both she and Khalif have been heartened by the support from the Tiburon community, with both reiterating they feel lucky to live in town.

“We’re here because we love Tiburon, and we know that Tiburon loves us back,” Awash said.

She stressed the importance to use the incident as a “learning step.”

“Maybe this happened to us because we can bring this out and make sure we have these conversations in our homes and with our families and loved ones and members of community and create something positive that’s going to make Tiburon better for all of us,” she said.

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