Don Bolles: Episode 3 "The Menace Within"

Richard Ruelas: Ruelas: Previously on Rediscovering Don Bolles, a murdered journalist

Richard Ruelas: The Funks seemed frustrated that they couldn't get the newspapers to cover the dog racing industry.

Trow: He was never fair with them at all.

Richard Ruelas: Finally in 1969 there were stories about dog racing. The ones written by Bolles. Brad Funk thought the stories were not just about journalism. He saw a conspiracy. The newspaper was out to get him.

MR. FUNK: Don, you are getting into an area there that, you know, that -- we've been through this one before. There's no point .. and knowing full well the way you might write something up and say anything.

Richard Ruelas: Sometime in early September, the editors at the Republic made a decision. They decided the allegations of wiretapping deserved public airing. This was going to be a newspaper story. Bolles couldn't write it. He was part of it. So, editors assigned it to DomFrasca.

Cheifetz: Why don't you look into George Johnson? I have memos on this man Dom Frasca: Let me see if I understand you because actually I would like more enlightenment on that point.

Cheifetz: Yeah I'm just telling you be careful in dealing with this man. I mean that's my judgment.

Richard Ruelas: Maybe Johnson was telling the truth. But Frasca said it wasn't solid enough to go with in the newspaper. Not yet.

Richard Ruelas: Meanwhile, Bolles started having doubts of his own.

MR. BOLLES: I always thought it curious that a big shot like him would want to work on a piddly paper ...

Richard Ruelas: About his co-worker.

music fades out

Richard Ruelas: On Sunday, September 13, 1970, The Arizona Republic published a story that said reporter Don Bolles and Congressman Sam Steiger had been wiretapped by the Funk family. And they weren't coy about it either. There were a lot of clues that the Republic thought it was an important story.

Richard Ruelas: It ran on a Sunday, the day with the largest readership. It was front page. With a headline that ran all the way across. And a line that said the story was copyrighted.

Richard Ruelas: The story started with this sentence: A former dog track investigator has charged that the telephones of an Arizona congressman, the State Racing Commission Chairman and others, including a newspaper reporter, were tapped.

Richard Ruelas: The story went on to say that a man named George Johnson freely admitted hiring the wiretappers. And that his story was being investigated by both the F.B.I. and the Maricopa County Attorney's Office.

Richard Ruelas: The story was written by Bolles' reporting partner, Dom Frasca. You heard from him in the last episode.

Operator: And who's calling?

Frasca: It's Mr. Dom Frasca from Phoenix, Arizona.

Richard Ruelas: Although Frasca wrote the story, he had grave doubts about it. He doubted Johnson's credibility. And he wasn't alone in that.

Mr. Watkins: George was in the building business, and I have known him for a long time, and I knew his -- knew his -- well, this is off the record?

Bolles: Yes.

Watkins: My brother and I have been scared of him for a long time. And we are scared of the people he's connected with.

Richard Ruelas: Plus, there were major holes with Johnson's story. There were no recordings of wiretapped conversations. Little evidence existed at all outside of Johnson's word.

Richard Ruelas: I'm Richard Ruelas: Ruelas, and this is Rediscovering Don Bolles, a murdered journalist.

music ends

Richard Ruelas: The paper's choice to run the story with only a single source evidence demonstrates one thing: the editors' trust in Don Bolles' instincts as a reporter. Although he didn't write the story, he was instrumental in uncovering the facts around it.

Richard Ruelas: And it makes sense that Bolles would push for the story. The wiretap allegations left him feeling violated. They'd gone past attacking him as a journalist. They went into his home. And Bolles worked hard to keep his private life private. His widow Rosalie offered this explanation.

Rosalie: I think he thought he could handle everything himself.

Richard Ruelas: Bolles got sympathetic calls in response to the story about him being wiretapped. The man in this call was never identified, but he must've been the subject of a Bolles story or two given his comment.

Man: I know you wouldn't give me the sweat off your balls if I were dying of thirst.

Bolles: Yes I would. What makes you say that?

Funk man: Well, I think the newspaper's always been kind of hard on me ...

Bolles: Not me

Richard Ruelas: Still, this man said that he considered Bolles honest. Well, he used a cruder phrase. Quote "an honest son of a (bleep)."

Man: So when you get a chance ... well, that's certainly true. And even if you had, I'd still not listen to anybody piss on you. When you get a chance, drop over.

Richard Ruelas: Bolles also got a phone call about the story from Johnson.

MR. JOHNSON: Hope I didn't wake you up.

MR. BOLLES: No. I'm up.

MR. JOHNSON: I see we all made the front pages.

MR. BOLLES: Yeah. How about that? Isn't that. quite a story?

Richard Ruelas: Johnson had various gripes, some more minor than others.

MR. JOHNSON: Okay. If it ever comes again, please contact me and let me give a decent picture like you guys gave.

Richard Ruelas: Johnson told Bolles he was worried how he came across. He seemed like a rat -- an informer who turned on his former friends. Johnson was worried his kids would get teased at school because of it.

MR. JOHNSON: Well, no, I just -- you know, I was just -- I was just going to have my ex-wife take my kids and take them to California and put them in school, because, shit, this is killing me.

Richard Ruelas: Bolles tried his best to assuage Johnson.

MR. BOLLES: Oh, no, it doesn't make you out looking like a bad guy. No, really. I think it makes you look like a very good guy.

MR. JOHNSON: Okay. Maybe I'm just a little super-sensitive.

MR. BOLLES: Yeah, I think you're looking at it from the wrong way. You ask some friends what they think of how it looks, and they're going to say, by God, this guy's doing, you know, going to the authorities, doing the right thing. Re -- you know, I think very definitely it gives you a good -- a good reputation there.

Richard Ruelas: Bolles kept trying to persuade Johnson to continue speaking with authorities, to tell them what he knew. Johnson was willing to help, but he knew that he would be admitting to a possible crime. He wanted an immunity deal before saying anything.

BOLLES: Hey, but listen, I understand you were with the County Attorney yesterday. What all happened on that?

MR. JOHNSON: You know, he said that we'd have give him the whole thing and then he'd have to see about giving us immunity. And, hell, they've had that stuff for a week, and he said he didn't check any of it or, you know.

Richard Ruelas: Bolles felt wronged. He wanted justice, but getting it would be complicated. Everything rested on one man: George Johnson. But Johnson's tarnished credibility, and his determination to get immunity, stood in Bolles' way.

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Richard Ruelas: Bolles and Frasca were also starting to get calls about George Johnson. People who had dealt with him were warning the two not to trust him.

Porter: I knew that Johnson. He's no good either. But who else could they get for something like that?

Bolles: Was he down there when you were there?

Porter: I knew him through my former wife about six to 8 yrs ago. He's a no good son of a (expletive).

Ruelas: Still, Bolles stuck by him.

Bolles: He's no saint. He's telling the truth on this though.

music swells again

music fades

Richard Ruelas: Bolles also talked to the U.S. Attorney and the County Attorney about Johnson.

Richard Ruelas: Bolles told the U.S. Attorney that he feared for Johnson's safety. He didn't want Johnson to be killed for being a rat..

Bolles: I just have a little fear that somebody may get to Johnson, either physically or otherwise.

Richard Ruelas: Bolles told the county attorney that he was getting calls from people about Johnson.

Bolles: Off the record, boy we sure are getting calls on what an unreliable, no-good-nick character Johnson is, but of course we had his police records before hand ...

Moises: Sure.

Bolles: The kind of guy that would do these things is not gonna be an Eagle Scout.

Richard Ruelas: But the story Frasca wrote about the wiretaps wasn't the only coverage of the Funks that week. The Republic wasn't done with them yet. The Republic published a follow-up story on Monday. It was written by Bolles. The second piece was also based on taped phone calls provided by Johnson. They're a bit hard to hear today, but here's what you need to know about them.

layer sounds of the tape of the tapes underneath this

Richard Ruelas: These recordings were made by Brad Funk as he talked to racing commissioners. That's perfectly legal in Arizona because we're what's known as a one-party consent state. It's OK to tape so long as one person knows.

layer back in sound

Richard Ruelas: What was on those recordings sounded shady to Bolles. Racing commissioners were talking about an upcoming hearing with the Funks. Saying they would feed the Funks questions in advance. That the whole hearing was just for show.

bring back sound for the final time.

Richard Ruelas: That story followed the path Bolles had been on for months. He had tried to show corruption in the racing industry. Now he had tapes that showed it. And he was eager to print a story that exposed the cozy relationship between the regulators and the race tracks.

But he was also shaken about what happened to him personally while doing so.

People had heard his phone calls. People had gone through his bank accounts. At least that's what he believed. Bolles was worried about what else they might do to come after him. At some point, Bolles started worrying about his own safety.

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Richard Ruelas: Bolles got a call from Paul Rademacher, an official in the state Democratic party. Rademacher told Bolles that the Funks had called him seeking dirt on Bolles.

Bolles: So you went down a greyhound park and then what'd they'd say?

Rademacher: They wanted to know about you.

Bolles: Like what?

Rademacher: You know if I know anything about you. I says no.

Richard Ruelas: Rademacher told Bolles about something unusual he saw outside the Republic building. It made him realize that Bolles was scared.

Rademacher: And the thing that's got me is one day I drove by the newspaper you had your car parked across the street on the Second Ave, uh Second Street. And you were looking at your tires and looking around your car and just the way you're looking at it. You know I had been in there sometime before that. I know you're spooked.

Richard Ruelas: Bolles told Rademacher that what he saw wasn't unusual. He always took a peek under his car.

Bolles: As a matter of routine, I always check to see if anybody's been fiddling with it because I know what I'm up against.

music ends

Richard Ruelas: Bolles never told his wife Rosalie about this routine.

Rosalie: No I know he took certain precautions. I didn't know this but I found out later that he always checked the car and he was careful too.

Richard Ruelas: When he was at home, Bolles would talk about being angry at the Funks. But he didn't talk about feeling endangered. He didn't want his wife to worry. When we travelled to South Carolina to meet her, she said that her husband didn't ask her to change her own routines.

Rosalie: Because he didn't want it to be part of our lives. That's not what we were about. And he took care of it. He wanted to. He told me he would handle everything.

Richard Ruelas: But, there was another threat growing against Bolles. At least in Bolles's mind.

And this one was coming from inside the newsroom.

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Richard Ruelas: Dom Frasca -- the reporter who wrote the story about the wiretapping, the one who had grave doubts about it ... he continued to have doubts. And they were growing.

Richard Ruelas: Frasca still thought it was a mistake that the paper ran the story about the wiretapping allegations. And the days that passed made him regret it even more. Not only did he doubt George Johnson's credibility, he thought the newspaper let Congressman Sam Steiger have a free shot at the Funks.

MR. FRASCA: The story as it is now, you see. Any of Steiger's opponents or anyone who feels he's running for re-election could say, aw, it's a lot of baloney, it's a political stunt.

Richard Ruelas: Frasca also knew there were whispers about Steiger being on the take from Vegas mobsters. He thought it would only be fair for the paper to spend some time examining those rumors.

Richard Ruelas: Frasca's concern was so great that he didn't dwell on these thoughts. He typed them up in a memo and made copies. He made sure the top editors -- and Bolles -- saw it.

Richard Ruelas: It's not entirely clear what Bolles thought about the memo, but the memo would play a significant role in Bolles' story.

Richard Ruelas: It's fair to say that Bolles and Frasca had a professional relationship that was complicated. They had just met months ago. Bolles seemed eager to work alongside someone who had experience reporting on the mob. But the tussle over publishing the wiretap story strained their relationship to the point where Bolles wondered whether Frasca's reservations were rooted in more than a journalist's dedication to the truth. As we said in the last episode, Bolles had heard rumors about Frasca. Wild ones. Rumors that he might have mob ties.

Richard Ruelas: He passed the rumors on to his city editor, Tom Sanford. Sanford said he would investigate them. And a few weeks later, he wrote up what he found and sent it to Bolles.

We don't know what he wrote. We don't have a copy. Bolles destroyed it after reading it.

At least that's what he told Sanford in a memo of his own.

And what Bolles wrote is our only clue as to what Sanford found in his investigation.

Bolles wrote that he was glad Sanford didn't find proof that Frasca was tied to the mob. That he respected Frasca as a colleague and that he had learned a lot from him.

But, after all this, there was a big change. Frasca was no longer Bolles's reporting partner. He was taken off the organized crime series.

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Richard Ruelas: With Frasca's wiretap story and Bolles' racing commission corruption, story done, the paper shifted its focus toward the long-term project on the mob.

Richard Ruelas: Even though Frasca was off the organized crime series, the Republic still kept Bolles on it. Bolles would work on the mafia investigation alone.

The paper gave it the title The Menace Within and started promoting it while Bolles was still reporting and writing it.

Richard Ruelas: There were ads in the newspaper dropping salacious hints about what he was uncovering. The in-house ads, as they're called in the industry, said that Bolles would name names. The series would identify people who had possible ties to organized crime.

Richard Ruelas: This didn't go unnoticed. Bolles started getting calls from people about the ads, including one from George Johnson.

Johnson: I saw the ad in the paper the paper this morning, so I guess you've been pretty busy. **Bolles:** Yeah.

Richard Ruelas: At one point, Bolles wanted to talk with a man named Anthony J. Nicoli. He was a sports agent. Bolles suspected **him** of having mafia ties.

Bolles and Frasca had already interviewed Nicoli together. But Bolles wanted a follow-up interview. And that interview would take place in the office of Nicoli's attorney, Harry Cavanaugh.

Bolles: 1 2 3. Testing 1, 2, 3. **Cavanaugh:** You starting?

Bolles: Yes.

Cavanaugh: I haven't had a chance to meet with you before on this matter because I was in trial and this came up earlier but I would like to find out some specific answers to some questions. Number one. I'd like to know the purpose of the interview. The inquiry.

Richard Ruelas: Cavanaugh was among the leading attorneys in the city at the time. He asked Bolles if Frasca would be joining them.

Bolles: We are in an investigative stage. To determine whether or not a an article about Mr. Nikolai and his sports activities will be published.

Cavanaugh: Okay. So that's my concern. The last time I understand Mr. Frasca was present. I wasn't here now he's aware. He called me. He was the wrong person. Where is he today?

Bolles: He's on other assignments.

Cavanaugh: He's not on this assignment?

Bolles: Not presently.

Richard Ruelas: And then Cavanaugh dropped a hammer. He said he didn't think Bolles could be trusted to write about the mafia. He said that Nicoli would talk to anyone at the Republic except Bolles. He said that Bolles was too close to the story.

Cavanaugh: And I'm very concerned that you are questioning Mr. Nikolai for the purpose of putting information into this article, "The Menace Within." And it has come to my attention, Mr. Bolles, that you are less than completely objective about this matter of mafia, Cosa Nostra. And I'm afraid that we have reason to question the your willingness or ability to be completely fair, impartial honest men writing with integrity.

Richard Ruelas: Cavanaugh said he had proof that Bolles was too close to the story. And that, if needed, he would air it.

Cavanaugh: And as far as we are concerned, we would prefer to give our information to any representative of the paper who would be fair, impartial, look at it without a jaundiced eye, which I'm afraid we think you have. If we have to, we can show you why.

Bolles: Well, you're entitled to your opinion. I assure you I'm going to be fair.

Richard Ruelas: That was pretty much the end of the interview.

sound of tape layered underneath

Richard Ruelas: The next conversation on the tape is pretty muddy. But, given that it is on the tape immediately following that conversation with Cavanaugh, it could be related. Johnson asks something like: Do you know what he's got?

Richard Ruelas: Bolles says he doesn't

Bolles: I have no idea. I really don't.

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Richard Ruelas: We have no idea what information Cavanaugh had. Whatever he was claiming to know never became clear. All Bolles knew was one of the leading attorneys in town had threatened to smear him with dirt. This was in addition to the Funks spreading rumors that he was on the take from Vegas mobsters...

The Funks detailed those rumors in a letter sent to Bolles's editors.

We couldn't find a copy of the Funks' letter. But here is Bolles's reaction to it. He was talking about it with George Johnson.

MR. BOLLES: Yeah. Well, it -- it's not a laughing matter to me. You know, I'm investigating organized crime, and they say, well, Bolles is in with them. Well, of course, that's going to -that's going to destroy my reputation. I wouldn't have anything to do with those people. That the story is not true and yet he keeps repeating it and I ... that really bothers me.

Richard Ruelas: But the threats against his reputation and the rumors that he was connected with the Vegas mob didn't stop Bolles from pursuing his story. The Republic continued to promote The Menace Within. Bolles even got calls from readers looking forward to it.

Source: I saw a clip in the paper that you're coming out on mafia?

Don Bolles: Yeah. You betcha.

Source: You haven't gone me in there, have you?

Don Bolles: No sir.

Source: Because you won't ... anybody?

Don Bolles: *laughs* Well, I'll tell you, there's an awful lot of worried people around town! **Source:** I'll betchu! When I read that the other day, I just said I bet there's a bunch of sweat pouring off of someone's forehead.

Richard Ruelas: The Republic had promised a major series. Bolles was determined to deliver. Despite the threats to his safety and reputation.

music swells

Richard Ruelas: The Menace Within ran on the front page over the course of 10 days. It had strong allegations. Bolles said a leading political figure was trying to open a brothel in Arizona, although he didn't name that person. But Bolles, as promised, did name names. He suggested the owner of coffee shop chain, Hobo Joe's, had mob ties. And, yes, he suggested Cavanaugh's client -- the sports agent Anthony Nicoli -- also had mob ties.

Richard Ruelas: Bolles received a lot of phone calls reacting to the series. Some were critical. Most were complimentary. And in talking to readers, you can hear how much Bolles invested himself in this series. It mattered to him.

Bolles: My feeling is, as I've gone through this study of organized crime here, the businessmen know a hell of a lot what's going on. And their attitude is, "Well, don't get me involved." Well, the only way we're going to turn this thing back and turn it around is for the businessmen who do know something, to say what they know.

Caller: They don't realize how it came in here, what it did to our city. And we've got a beautiful little city.

Bolles: I know it. I love it. And I want to see it stay that way.

Richard Ruelas: The last article in Bolles's series was pretty much a plea to readers to stay vigilant against mob influence. A version of: If you see something, say something.

Richard Ruelas: One caller reacting to the mob series was worried about Bolles's safety.

Porter: Listen, I hope they don't rub you out.

Bolles: Nah, they wouldn't dare **Porter**: They wouldn't dare

Bolles: Nah, they frame you they'll set me up on something or other. Claim that I'm running

prostitutes or something. They'll think of something

Richard Ruelas: But here's the thing about the Menace Within series ... Though it named some names, it <u>didn't</u> really expose many mafia ties. It exposed the possibility of mafia ties. It warned about the possibility of corruption. Bolles was stamping out embers. He was hunting down any hint of corruption. BUT The city was actually pretty clean.

Here's Bill Meek, a Republic reporter who worked alongside Bolles.

Bill Meek: I never did feel that the criminal element in Phoenix was a very big deal. They weren't very good at it. They were rich mostly and didn't really have to do crime in order to get along. I mean it sort of I was not a big fan of the papers estimates, efforts to bring organized crime to heel.

Richard Ruelas: The Attorney General's office started a task force in response to the series. The goal of the task force was to uncover organized crime's reach in the city. It used the Menace Within as a blueprint.

Richard Ruelas: And what it found was there really wasn't much. Here's Patrick McGroder. He's an attorney in Phoenix who was on that team.

Patrick Mcgroder III: But yeah we we didn't find that type of historic organized crime that one relates to the east coast. We we just didn't find it.

Richard Ruelas: Bolles was over zealous. And he was fine with that. He wanted to stamp out those embers... Because he had no mercy when it came to any amount of corruption. It's the type of reporter he was... Almost to a fault. Bolles wasn't interested in understanding or excuses. He was out to expose corruption. He didn't want to cause harm to people who didn't deserve it. But he balanced that with a need to keep people honest.

Richard Ruelas: Here's Bolles talking to a judge about it. The judge was feeding a tip to Bolles, but worried about Bolles' accusatory style.

Bolles: Ok, listen, John. If you think of any more things around town which you feel ought to be looked into like this one, please give us a call. We're really going very strongly into this right

now. We think it's very definitely in the public interest to expose these guys because they're really moving in strong. So if you pick up anything that you think you know ... you're not going to say voila, but you're dubious about it, give us a call.

John: Well, I always have mixed emotions about your exposes because there's no protection built into them for the innocent.

Bolles: Well, we try not to involve the innocent.

Richard Ruelas: "Try not to involve the innocent." Meaning? No guarantees. It was a style of reporting that played well with his editors and his publisher. But if you were a subject of his reporting, you didn't like it. Bolles could seem unreasonable.

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Richard Ruelas: That's how the Funks felt. They thought they couldn't get a fair shake from Bolles. Here's Funk complaining about Bolles to Dom Frasca.

MR. FUNK: Yes. Well, I had some fair play from Don Bolles last year.

MR. FUNK: And I have got to be a little dubious, judging from experience, you know, once burned it's your fault, twice burned, it's my fault, and

MR. FUNK: Well, I don't know. It's just the way I seen Bolles edit stories and edit statements, and they come out meaning something altogether different, so

Frasca: Well, that I've never done in my life.

Richard Ruelas: So the Funks wanted to fight back. They didn't like the story that accused them of tapping Bolles's phone. They had admitted to hiring Johnson to look into Bolles. What they denied was any illegal activity. They said they never wanted Bolles wiretapped or his bank account examined. They maintained George Johnson was lying about that.

Richard Ruelas: The Funks made the next move. They filed a lawsuit. The lawsuit alleged that they'd been wronged by the story that said they'd wiretapped Bolles. The Funks filed their lawsuit against the newspaper. But they also filed suit against Bolles personally. And they named his wife for good measure.

Richard Ruelas: The price they wanted? Twenty million dollars.

Richard Ruelas: Meanwhile, the criminal investigation seemed to be stalling out. Law enforcement was skeptical of Johnson. At least they were wary enough of him that no one offered him an immunity deal to find out if he knew more.

MR. JOHNSON: Maybe it's -- well, maybe they're just playing it kind of cute, maybe it's best, because the way it is right now, I can just refuse to answer anybody.

MR. BOLLES: Yeah. Well, d on't. Tell the truth, you know.

MR. JOHNSON: Yeah. No, but I mean, see, if they'd already granted that immunity,...

Richard Ruelas: And there seemed to be little public pressure that would prompt officials to act. People were talking about The Menace Within, but no one seemed to care much that the reporter who wrote it had had his phone wiretapped.

music ends

Richard Ruelas: So here was the state of Don Bolles at this time. He was a tenacious reporter on the hunt against injustice. And he also felt a deep injustice had been committed against him personally. He'd been under attack. He felt his wife and family had been under attack. He was even making it a habit to routinely check under his car.

And people were spreading rumors about his professional reputation There was whatever Cavanaugh had threatened him with, saying he had information that Bolles was too close to the mafia. And the Funks and Emprise were claiming he was on the take by Steiger or Las Vegas gambling interests.

They sent a letter outlining those claims to state lawmakers. They also sent it again to the bosses at the newspaper.

Bolles: Cheifetz, by the way, sent another letter to my managing editor repeating that baloney about me being hired by Steiger to write the anti-wire -- anti-racing story.

Richard Ruelas: And now, he was facing financial ruin from a lawsuit.

theme music begins

Richard Ruelas: Bolles wanted justice. And to get it, he would have to take matters into his own hands.

(pause for music)

Richard Ruelas: Next time on Rediscovering Don Bolles, a murdered journalist ...

Richard Ruelas: Bolles kept hearing from law enforcement that charges were just around the corner. After all, tapping his phone was a violation of the law.

Richard Ruelas: But Bolles was getting impatient with the pace of events. He wanted to go on the offensive. Here he is talking to Johnson about it. And Johnson is egging him on.

Johnson: Well Don, let me ask you this. I think, 'cause you know, the way things are right now, and I really didn't do myself any good by not appearing, from the way you know the public looks

at it. They don't know the particulars. But I think it's about time ... well, let me just ask you, your advice on this. I'd just like to take the offensive against these pricks now.

Richard Ruelas: Remember that memo we told you about? The one Dom Frasca wrote questioning the merits of the wiretapping story? We told you that memo would play a key role. And here is where it could come back.

Richard Ruelas: Rediscovering: Don Bolles, a murdered journalist was reported and voiced by me, Richard Ruelas: Ruelas. Taylor Seely is the lead producer. Katie O'Connell is the executive producer. Script supervision came from Shaun McKinnon and Josh Susong. Web design for this project came from John Paul McDonnall. Social media was lead by Danielle Woodward.

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