



Antoine Tolbert: a Cleveland superhero or a vigilante?

Ideastream Public Media | By [Matthew Richmond](#)

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Illustration By Lauren Green / Ideastream Public Media

Two men in bulletproof vests armed with rifles busted up a possible drug deal involving a minor in a residential neighborhood on Cleveland's East Side one summer afternoon last year.

They were not police. And they were not there by accident.

One of the men, Antoine Tolbert, had an assault rifle slung over his shoulder and a handgun in his holster. He approached the driver of a black Volkswagen Jetta, who was apparently about to sell marijuana to a 13-year-old boy.

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"Put it down and step out of the car," Tolbert instructed.

He and his partner are community activists and have no official authority, but the command — and the guns — were enough to make the man flee the vehicle and take off down the tree-lined street on foot.

The men let him go and waited for the police with the teen.

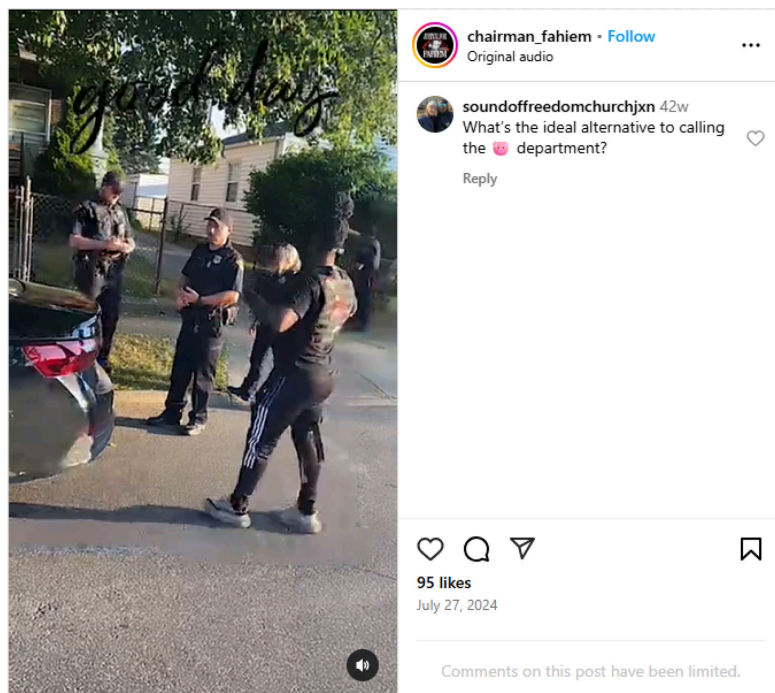
For years, Cleveland police have told the mostly Black families living in neighborhoods most beset by crime and poverty, like Buckeye, where the alleged attempted drug deal took place, that violence prevention starts with the parents.

They have called on community members to cooperate with police investigations.

They have asked others to address the "root cause" of violence.

Tolbert, who is known as Chairman Fahiem, and members of New Era, a community activist group that provides armed safety patrols and neighborhood programs around Buckeye, say they are picking up that torch.

Tolbert prodded the boy to give the police information, according to [a video of the alleged drug deal posted to Tolbert's social media](#).



In a screenshot from a video posted to Antoine Tolbert's Instagram page on July 27, 2024, Tolbert (right, with back to camera) speaks with three Cleveland Division of Police officers following an intervention into what he said was an attempted sale of marijuana to a 13-year-old.

"Stand straight. Talk to him. Look at him," Tolbert said, prompting the nervous boy to address the officer. "Look at him when you're talking to him, come on."

Tolbert provided police something else authorities say they rarely get: an opportunity to counsel a young man before he gets involved in a dangerous trade or gets hurt.

"You've got to be careful with this stuff," one of the officers told the boy. "People [are] getting shot over stuff like this. You're only 13 years old."

Before leaving, the officer turned to Tolbert and Rameer Askew, a member of New Era.

"We appreciate what you guys do," he said.

Eight months later, charges came down, not against the alleged drug dealer, but against Tolbert and Askew.

Police charged them with kidnapping and aggravated robbery.

The man the boy said planned to sell him drugs is listed as the victim.

Activists or vigilantes?



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New Era Chairman Antoine Tolbert stands in the group's new "clubhouse" on Buckeye Road during its grand opening in April, 2025.

The charges are an example of Cleveland law enforcement's deep skepticism of Tolbert and his group. In court filings, officials have described Tolbert as part gangster, part cult leader.

Prosecutors wrote that Tolbert "is armed with a rifle and a handgun and veils his vigilantism by claiming he and his followers offer privatized community protection." They called members of New Era Tolbert's "followers," "devotees" and "disciples."

A police detective wrote in a supplemental report that Tolbert's influence extends across the community.

"Everything I am hearing is he has a lock on the Buckeye neighborhood," the detective wrote.

Even some of those who support his mission aren't completely sold on his work.

The boy's mother said she sees value in New Era's work, but some of his methods, especially the weapons he carries, make her uncomfortable in Buckeye, a neighborhood already struggling with gun violence.

Still, she said charging Tolbert and Askew was out of line.

"Cleveland has an issue with Fahiem," the boy's mother said, using Tolbert's nickname. "I feel like that's why the charges were brought."

The Cuyahoga County Prosecutor's office declined to comment on the community perception that authorities are trying to "take down" Tolbert.

"Your email speaks volumes about your journalistic integrity and the direction of your current story," Lexi Bauer, a spokesperson for County Prosecutor Mike O'Malley, wrote in an email. "We decline to comment for your obviously biased story, and we will let the facts speak for themselves in court. Perhaps you should, too."

Currently, Tolbert is facing two separate criminal cases, a total of nine charges, in Cuyahoga County related to his work with New Era. If convicted, he faces years in

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Whether Tolbert and New Era are seen as trusted community activists or vigilantes is something of a Rorschach inkblot test for Cleveland's criminal justice system.

New Era is most active in and around Buckeye and Shaker Square, both neighborhoods desperate for more security and deeply skeptical of the city police force's ability to keep them safe and of its willingness to treat them with respect.



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A view down Buckeye Road on Cleveland's East Side. New Era Cleveland's "clubhouse" can be seen on the corner on the left, with a group gathered outside.

The blocks surrounding the house where Tolbert says he broke up the drug deal with the 13-year-old paint a picture of the types of incidents that breed conflicting feelings about Cleveland police, even as neighbors express a deep desire for more safety.

Between 2020 and 2024, there were two fatal shootings within a quarter mile of the boy's block, [according to a New York Times analysis](#).

His house is also a quarter mile down the street from the notorious Imperial Avenue property where Anthony Sowell murdered 11 women between 2007 and 2009. Sowell left their bodies to rot in and around his home, which created a stench neighbors lived with for years.

Women in the neighborhood, which is predominantly Black and where many are poor, reported Sowell, but authorities mishandled [rape kits and DNA evidence](#) and, in one case, [did not find the victim credible](#). Families of his 11 victims complained they had

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New Era's rise corresponds with a nationwide crisis in confidence in the justice system.

Less than half of Americans said in [a 2023 Gallup survey](#) that the criminal justice system was "very" or "somewhat fair," down from two-thirds twenty years ago.

Black community leaders in the neighborhood say Tolbert is the rare individual willing to step up and address societal ills at a time when police can't or won't protect the citizenry.

"This is hard work. Most people are not going to do that," said Robert Render, a precinct committeeman and block club president known as "Mr. Buckeye," who has lived in the Buckeye neighborhood for 30 years.

"I'm talking about even in the Black community," he said. "They're not going to get dirt up underneath their fingernails and go do this kind of work in the neighborhood that is sometimes confrontational."



Ygal Kaufman / Ideastream Public Media

New Era Cleveland Chairman Antoine Tolbert is facing nine separate charges in two criminal cases headed to trial in Cuyahoga County in July.

From ER worker to Chairman Fahiem

In 2016, Tolbert was a 25-year-old emergency transporter at University Hospitals. Many of his patients were gunshot victims.

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"Seeing some of my friends, my peers come in riddled with bullets and stuff like that," he said, "I wanted to do something to help, but I didn't know where to start — didn't know what to do."

That's when Tolbert came across a program on social media started by [New Era Nation](#), a violence prevention and community organization in Detroit, focused on public safety, economic development and political organizing in Black communities.

One of New Era Nation's programs creates a "code of ethics in the community." Called [Safe Zones](#), the program encourages businesses to sign agreements with local New Era chapters and put "Safe Zone" stickers in their windows.

"This is how you're going to talk to people, this is how you're going to treat people, this is the standard that we're operating within," Tolbert said about the Safe Zones program, which he brought to Cleveland. "I thought that was powerful."

He joined the existing Cleveland chapter in 2017 and left his job at the hospital three years later to work with them.



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Antoine Tolbert, chairman of New Era Cleveland, photographed on April 12, 2025 during the grand opening of New Era Cleveland's building on Buckeye Road.

He also began doing armed patrols of the neighborhood once a week in response to shootings.

In 2022, [he was arrested while walking down St. Clair Avenue](#) with a handgun in a holster on his leg. Tolbert spent a night in jail, but a Grand Jury did not indict.

It's always been legal in Ohio to openly carry a firearm in your hand or in a holster outside your clothing. Ohio's Constitution guarantees the right to bear arms.

The arresting officer was suspended for 13 days, and Tolbert settled a lawsuit against the city for \$85,000.

Render, the community activist, said authorities have been looking for a way to disempower and discredit Tolbert for years.

"Everything that I have seen leads me to believe they want to make sure that he's out of business and that he can no longer carry a firearm," said Render. "To me, that is the ultimate goal. I think those powers that be are trying to completely discredit him, that he is convicted on something, something that will prohibit him from ever carrying a gun again."

Protection racket or request for respect?

Tolbert's methods stoked an already precarious relationship between some Cleveland small business owners, especially corner stores and gas stations often owned by people from outside the neighborhood, and some residents in predominantly Black neighborhoods on the city's East Side.

Those tensions came to a head on Aug. 3, 2024, when Tolbert went to a Race Fuel gas station near the corner of Lee Road and Harvard Avenue. He says he was there to break up a fight among a crowd gathered in the parking lot and to prevent further violence.

The police and store owners say there was no fight, and that Tolbert threatened employees with guns and demanded payment for security.

New Era launched a boycott and organized a protest of Race Fuel's gas stations.

On Aug. 14, Tolbert was arrested on his way to the ongoing protest outside the Lee Road gas station and was charged with extortion, aggravated menacing, intimidating a crime victim or witness and breaking and entering. He maintains his innocence.

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"It's not extortion when a group of community activists seek to boycott a local business that, in their view, is harming the community," said Peter Pattakos, one of Tolbert's attorneys.

New Era President Austreeia Everson, who is also Tolbert's domestic partner, said she later attempted to mediate the conflict by meeting with store representatives outside the courts.

Prosecutors saw that attempt differently, and charged Everson with extortion, intimidation of a crime victim, witness or attorney and aggravated menacing.

Tolbert, Everson and Askew will stand trial in July.

Police told prosecutors that there was gas station surveillance video of the event, but "much of the gas station's surveillance footage was erased," court records show.

Prosecutors unsuccessfully asked a judge to remove one of Tolbert's attorneys, Maryam Assar, who was present when Everson met with store employees.

"It feels absurdist. Truly, a little bit like I'm in the Twilight Zone," said Shereen Naser, a Cleveland State University professor, who said she, too, was at that meeting to de-escalate tensions. Naser's family, like Race Fuel's owners, is from the Palestinian territories, and her father owned a corner store.

"Because if we're going to be criminalized for having community conversations and working on de-escalation and trying to support a better Cleveland, then what's left to us?" said Naser.

When asked for comment about the case, a spokesperson from the county prosecutor's office said the reporter was biased for interviewing community members about Tolbert.

"If standing in front of gas station doors carrying long guns and AR-15s blocking the public's access in retaliation for not being hired as security is acceptable to Ideastream, we will respectfully have to disagree," wrote Bauer. "This is not an episode of The Sopranos."

One person's vigilante is another person's hero

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For years, cities around the country have struggled with [maintaining police staffing levels](#), [dwindling trust in law enforcement](#), and [growing concerns about violent crime](#). Recently, citizen groups, some fueled by social media, have cropped up across the state, allegedly to address crime, often developing uneasy relationships with law enforcement.

In Sandusky, the sheriff called the group [Dads Against Predators](#) “well-intentioned,” but “reckless.” The group has taken violent steps to punish people they believe to be a threat to public safety.

[A group in Canton called Bikers Against Predators](#) sets up stings to film men seeking to set up sexual encounters with underage victims. The group is described as “vigilantes,” but it’s not clear they are doing anything more than setting up meetings and then posting videos of the encounters.

In [Lincoln Heights, Ohio, a majority Black community about 30 miles north of Cincinnati](#), residents formed an [armed protection group](#) in response to what they said was an insufficient police response when a neo-Nazi group waved swastika flags and shouted racial slurs from a highway overpass in February.

Experts say the key to determining whether groups like New Era and Tolbert are vigilantes, as prosecutors describe them, or activists, as they are seen by many in Buckeye, is whether their behavior is “extralegal,” beyond what the law allows.

Vigilantism is “the extralegal prevention, investigation or punishment of offenses,” according to University of Colorado political science professor Regina Bateson, who studies violence and politics, threats to democracy and vigilantism.

“Vigilantism is more than a reaction to crime; it is an exercise in power,” according to Bateson.

Bateson said Tolbert may be more likely to be viewed as a dangerous vigilante because he is Black.

“In the U.S., the term vigilante is very racially coded, right? It has a lot of racial connotations. It's almost always white people that are successfully able to claim that they're vigilantes in the kind of legitimate sense,” said Bateson.

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She said the group's activities, like boycotts, citizen arrests and armed patrols, sound like regular community organizing to her.

She pointed to similarities with the Guardian Angels, a crime-patrolling group based in New York City, founded to patrol the streets and the subway during an era of rampant crime. That group has been around since the 1970s but is not without controversy. In 2024, [Angels reportedly tackled a New York resident on live television after confusing him with a migrant](#), amid what the group's founder believed was a migrant-fueled surge in crime.

If it turns out New Era or Tolbert did kidnap people or take over the gas station, Bateson said that would be vigilantism.

Tolbert said he wasn't familiar with the term "vigilante" when asked about it. He said Bateson's definition does not accurately describe his work.

"We're just folks from the community that have come up with coordinated strategies to address gun violence in our neighborhoods, to address some of the food deserts, just a lot of the disparities that we're faced with in Black communities in particular," Tolbert said.

He started by adopting programs from the Detroit chapter — community engagement walks, resource distribution, handing out roses to people as a way to engage with residents — then added on his own ideas, like handing out ice cream from an ice cream truck.

And members — often in large groups — patrol high-crime neighborhoods carrying weapons, changing their patrols because criminals avoid areas where they're active, Tolbert said, and the patrols are every weekend during the summer.

"Almost like an artist painting a picture," he said. "You go with your natural instinct on what would I like to see, or how would I want to be treated, and from there. We just went crazy."



Ygal Kaufman / Ideastream Public Media

When New Era Cleveland held a grand opening at its new “clubhouse” on Buckeye Road in April, 2025, there was a room with free clothing, another with a couple of arcade games, rooms for relaxing or preparing food or grabbing a hot shower. New Era's Antoine Tolbert said the goal is to eventually keep the doors open 24 hours a day to provide anyone with a warm, safe place to go.

'We need all the help we can get'

Julian Khan has lived in Buckeye for decades. He runs through the list of work he's seen Tolbert do in the neighborhood: block cleanups, youth mentoring, violence prevention training, work in the juvenile detention center, community breakfasts, coat drives, block parties and the work with businesses to improve relations with the community.

He contrasts what Tolbert and New Era do to the efforts of a police force hit hard by retirements and low morale.

“What I find with New Era is that they are there to develop relationships and to help to extend the feeling of safety, right?” Khan said. “Not some overarching implementation of some safety initiative or anything like that. What helps me to feel safe is knowing that he's out there and that to me is the crux of safety and security.”

Robert Render first came across New Era one night while they were out on an armed patrol, which startled him at first.

But Render, who is from Buckeye, asked around and heard good things.

Bank, which closed because of public safety concerns but later reopened, safer.

"When they talk about first responders, that's exactly what they do. They're the first responders," said Render. "People talk a good game about what they need to do and what they're going to do. He does the work."

Render and Khan, who have both been involved in community building for decades, said they believe Tolbert is the heir to the legacy left by a previous era of Black Cleveland activists, including [Black nationalist Harlell Jones](#), a leader during the Hough Riots in the 1960s; Omar Ali-Bey, who [campaigns to improve conditions in public housing and confronted police brutality in the 1980s](#), and Khalid Samad, who specialized in youth violence prevention and founded the violence intervention group Peace in the Hood.

"They were advocates for our community," said Khan. "They helped implement standards, you know, as far as cultural standards, passing of information, family structure, appreciation."

Render and Khan also feel many of those activists were targeted by powerful political forces and institutions, and they worry that Tolbert is facing similar opposition now.

"We need all the help that we can get," said Render. "This guy is legitimate, okay. He hasn't harmed anybody. He hasn't shot anybody."

But they are not without reservations about Tolbert. Khan said he was concerned when a representative from the group did not attend a recent community conversation with more than 30 groups he organized on safety, and he does not support Tolbert's forays into city politics.

In 2021, Tolbert ran unsuccessfully against Ward 4's City Councilmember Deborah Gray, and at [a Cleveland City Council meeting in April](#), he announced plans to challenge Gray again in the newly drawn Ward 3. Ultimately, Tolbert decided against running and instead said he will endorse one of Gray's challengers, Sharon Spruill.

"I've repeatedly asked him to stick with the people and leave the politics to the politicians. His heart is with the people," said Khan. "It's hard, because touching enough people can turn political, regardless."

Khan said the way prosecutors and police refer to New Era's members as Tolbert's "disciples" or "followers" reminds him of the FBI's domestic counterintelligence program, known as COINTELPRO, a covert surveillance program launched in 1967 to "expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize the activities" of Black nationalist groups they considered a threat, [according to FBI documents](#).

Those groups included the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Nation of Islam and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, established by Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

In 1968, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover directed the program to "prevent the rise of a 'messiah' who could unify, and electrify, the militant black nationalist movement."

Render said many people remember the government's willingness to discredit Black people who stood up for their community.

"You single out African Americans, particularly African American men who are outspoken, who speak truth to power, and then you make an example out of it," said Render. "Some things never die in this country, OK?"

Before dawn on Dec. 4, 1969, [14 plainclothes police officers kicked down the door of a Chicago apartment](#) and started shooting. When the volley of bullets stopped, two young Black Panthers were dead, including 21-year-old Fred Hampton, deputy chairman of the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party.

Tolbert often talks about Hampton, whose life was made into the 2021 movie, "Judas and the Black Messiah."

He said he so respects Hampton's work organizing rallies and free breakfasts and negotiating a peace pact between rival gangs, and his willingness to die for it that he took his title, calling himself "Chairman" in his honor.

In Buckeye, Tolbert is known as "Chairman Fahiem."

Fahiem is an old nickname that comes from the 1993 movie Menace To Society, about growing up in South Los Angeles during the crack epidemic. The character, level-headed Sharif, also went by Fahiem.

"I grew up in a Muslim household," said Tolbert. "I was the guy in my group of friends always trying to be, like, the voice of reason. So that's where Fahiem came from."

In Menace To Society, Sharif dies in a drive-by.

Using the past to look to the future

In April, New Era held a grand opening at its "clubhouse" on Buckeye Road, funded in part by [a \\$150,000 grant from the St. Luke's Foundation](#). There was a room with free clothing, another with a couple of arcade games, rooms for relaxing or preparing food or grabbing a hot shower.



Ygal Kaufman / Ideastream Public Media

A scene from inside New Era Cleveland's "clubhouse" during its April 12, 2025 grand opening. The group offers services like hot meals, free clothes and counseling and hopes to eventually keep the site open 24 hours a day.

The goal is to eventually keep the doors open around the clock, so anyone could drop by whenever they needed a warm, safe place to go, said Tolbert.

"Monday, we're out looking for a missing kid. Tuesday, we're feeding people in the community. Wednesday, we're doing youth programming. Thursday, we're at the juvenile detention center," said Tolbert, whose trial begins on July 8. "I don't know what next year is going to bring, what the focus is going to be. But whatever is required, we're willing to be that solution."

Last summer, on a sunny day on Imperial Avenue, one mom was not thinking about activists from decades past or looking forward to the future of a community center or the outcome of a trial.

She was focused on the life of one 13-year-old child who had just taken a terrible risk.

Even though she didn't ask for his help, she said Tolbert's presence — and his successful attempt to thwart the suspected drug deal — made a "positive" impact on her son's life.

"You're supposed to be a leader," she told her son as they stood at the end of the drive outside their home. "You are a man. You choose what type of man you're going to be."

Editor's Note: Ideastream Public Media's Engaged Journalism team partnered with four community organizations, and paid for their services, to help organize listen-and-learn sessions about gun violence with community members in Cleveland, Akron and Lorain in 2023 and 2024. Information from those sessions helped inform coverage of gun violence, including the podcast, "[Living for We: Keep Ya Head Up](#)." New Era Cleveland, and its partner organization, The Love Project Movement, Inc, was one of those groups.



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Antoine Tolbert



Matthew Richmond

Matthew Richmond is a reporter/producer focused on criminal justice issues at Ideastream Public Media.

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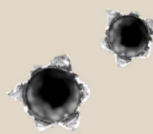
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