

The Central Park Five: ‘We Were Just Baby Boys’

The men, whose story will be brought to life in Netflix’s “When They See Us,” discuss the mini-series with their onscreen counterparts.



By Aisha Harris

May 30, 2019

One morning earlier this month, a group of 10 men and teenage boys gathered for a photo shoot in a small studio on the Lower East Side. The overall mood was chill; as the music of Nipsey Hussle, 50 Cent and Wale filled the room, they chatted amiably in between shots, laughing, joking and moving along to the beats.

The occasion for this gathering was bittersweet: Five of the subjects were Korey Wise, 46; Kevin Richardson, 44; Raymond Santana, 44; Antron McCray, 45; and Yusef Salaam, 45, known collectively as the Central Park Five. Their stories are being retold in “When They See Us,” a new Netflix mini-series created and directed by Ava DuVernay.

In 1989 the men — then teenagers — were arrested in connection with the rape and assault of a white female jogger, and eventually convicted in a case that came to symbolize the stark injustices black and brown people experience within the legal system and in media coverage. They were convicted based partly on police-coerced confessions, and each spent between six and 13-plus years in prison for charges including attempted murder, rape and assault.



From left, Ethan Herisse and Marquis Rodriguez in “When They See Us.”
Atsushi Nishijima/Netflix

The men maintained their innocence throughout the case, trial and prison terms, and all were exonerated after Matias Reyes, a convicted murderer and serial rapist, confessed to the crime in 2002. In 2014, they were awarded a \$41 million settlement, though the City of New York denied any wrongdoing.

The other five in the studio that day were the actors tasked with the challenge of portraying their younger selves in the series, premiering May 31: Jharrel Jerome, 21; Asante Blackk, 17; Marquis Rodriguez, 22; Caleel Harris, 15; and Ethan Herisse, 18.

[A reporter reflects on the true story of the Central Park Five .]

As they gathered for a group photo, Wise looked on and observed that they were in the stages of their lives when everything had stopped for him and the other men. “Amazing. Just beautiful looking at them,” he would say later when we sat down for an interview.

He added, “This is life after death. I always say that. From now on I know what Biggie was talking about. There’s life after death.”

In a series of chats, the Central Park Five and their onscreen counterparts discussed the pain, pride and emotional toll of revisiting those fateful events 30 years later. These are edited and condensed excerpts from those conversations.

Raymond Santana and Marquis Rodriguez



Reliving the events of the mini-series “brings back the pain; it brings back the memories,” said Santana, right. “But it’s necessary.”
Brad Ogbonna for The New York Times

Santana was 14 when he was arrested in 1989 and was incarcerated for close to seven years for the jogger case. In 2015, he tweeted the idea of a Central Park Five drama to DuVernay, who messaged him back with interest.

SANTANA Ava was always my choice to do this series. I never met the woman, I didn't even know who she was, but I'd watched "Selma" — there's a part where [Martin Luther King, Jr.] is confronted by [his wife] Coretta with recordings [of him with another woman], and I felt like that was bold to put in the film. By showing that, it showed the human side of this man who was put on a pedestal. And it told me that she had no fear of telling the truth.

[Reliving these events] brings back the pain; it brings back the memories. But it's necessary. I was ready and I was willing to relive, to go through that pain again, to cry — because it's necessary. It's a sacrifice. You want to change the culture, you've got to be engaged. This is how we got engaged.

RODRIGUEZ That first day at the table read, I was immediately struck by how much of a light you are in a room, how engaged he is when he speaks to people, how bright and smiling and happy. That was one of the most important things for me. Knowing where the story goes, how can I capture, at least for a moment, the levity of his childhood, when it was allowed to be a childhood?

One of my biggest fears as a person of color in this city, in this country is what happened to these men. There's nothing more terrifying than telling your truth and telling it over and over and over again, but having people refuse to honor it as the truth.

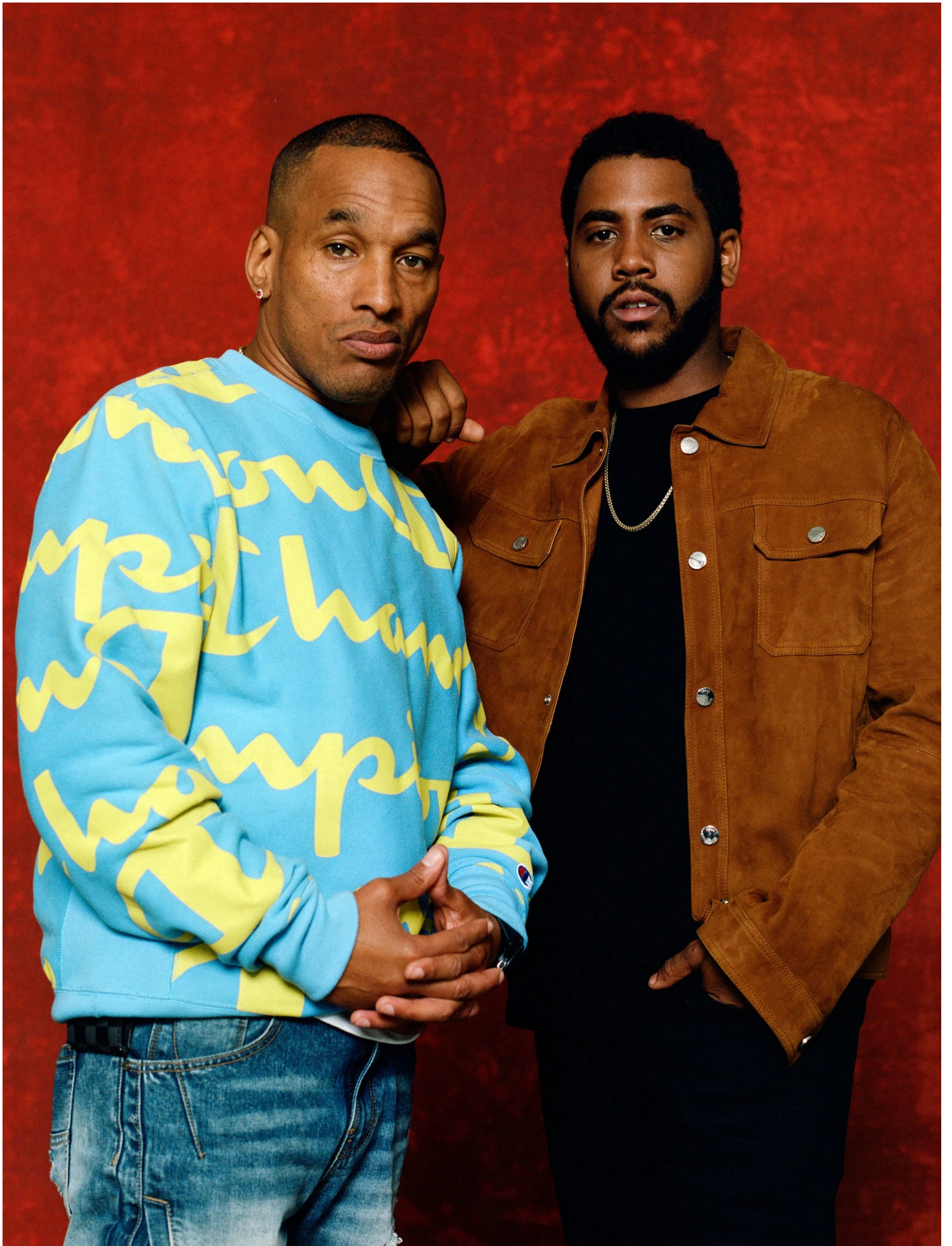
In that scene [when Raymond, Kevin, Yusef and Antron are in the holding cell], you're literally watching four boys have to work through really adult issues and they decide to tell the truth from there on out. But they shouldn't have to do that. That should not be their burden, to have to disentangle themselves from adult lies. It's often children of color's work.

SANTANA [My father] still probably blames himself, but he doesn't speak about it. Our relationship is good, but it's a little different because, as a parent, when you have a child, you want to instill these values and morals on how to navigate through life. And he never got that chance to give me that; I grew up in the system. And then here I was, I come back and now I'm a man who doesn't want to take orders. And I think that might be the only issue that we still have. I don't call him and say, "I got this problem, how do I solve it?"

RODRIGUEZ [As a cast] we were vulnerable with each other, we wept with each other and talked about the work with each other. We absolutely formed a brotherhood between us, and I think I'm so grateful for it.

SANTANA I told Marquis just today: We watch them, the way they interact with each other — we really sit there and go, "That's us." And Antron, when I said it, he started to tear up. He's like, "Come on, Ray, man!" You see the brotherhood. We were like, "Wow, that's us, the childhood that we lost is being displayed right in front of us."

Korey Wise and Jharrel Jerome



“This series is talking to my pain,” said Wise, left. “I’m enjoying it; at the same time, it hurts.” Brad Ogbonna for The New York Times

Korey Wise was with his friend Yusef Salaam when police picked up Salaam to take him in for questioning. Wise, 16, wasn't a suspect, but he agreed to go with his friend for moral support. He ended up being charged as well, and served more than 13 years, the longest of the five boys. His chance encounter in prison with Matias Reyes, who was serving a life sentence for multiple rapes and a murder, led Reyes to admit to the Central Park rape, and, after DNA confirmation, the men's exoneration.

WISE “What if?” That’s a bitter taste. Because what if I hadn’t met Reyes, I’d just be doing 15 [years], wondering. I’d still be working for my little pennies, for commissaries.

Yusef — that’s my boy. That’s my little childhood brother there. We were just baby boys, we were just trying to be entrepreneurs, having fun being kids. I had him out with me, riding him around, went to a barber shop, little haircut, little touch up. If [someone had told me], “You, little [expletive], yo. You stay here, you don’t go with him,” I wouldn’t have went.

JEROME The hardest part of playing Korey was finding his happy moments and finding his moments where he’s flirting with Lisa [played by Storm Reid], chilling with the homies or hanging out, smiling. It was hard to find those moments because you don’t see that unless you actually meet the man and see him smile yourself. He’s unique, and everything about him is unique. So it wasn’t about being Korey Wise, it was about embracing him.

WISE He aced it.

JEROME They are the strongest men on this planet. Their chests are high, their shoulders are up, their heads are held up high, and no matter what pains I go through in life, I’m going to channel the spirit of Korey Wise.

WISE This series is talking to my pain. I’m enjoying it; at the same time, it hurts. But I guess when it comes down to it — people are going to enjoy it. They’re going to enjoy this summer blockbuster.

JEROME “This summer blockbuster.” He just called himself a summer blockbuster.

Yusef Salaam and Ethan Herisse



“When we were found innocent, there was no tsunami of media that followed in the way that tsunami came out within the first few weeks when they thought we were guilty,” said Salaam, right. Brad Ogbonna for The New York Times

Salaam was 15 years old at the time of his arrest, and spent more than six years in prison. He is now a motivational speaker.

HERISSE I knew nothing [about these events before I was cast]. When I watched the [Ken Burns] documentary [“The Central Park Five”] I was shocked, because I had no idea that something like this could happen to anyone — especially people who were my age at the time. I tried my hardest, from the audition on, to bring out that anger and disappointment in the justice system that I felt.

I’m at a different place now, where seeing that this thing happened and is still happening, even now — if I were going to be put anywhere near our system, I wouldn’t feel completely safe.

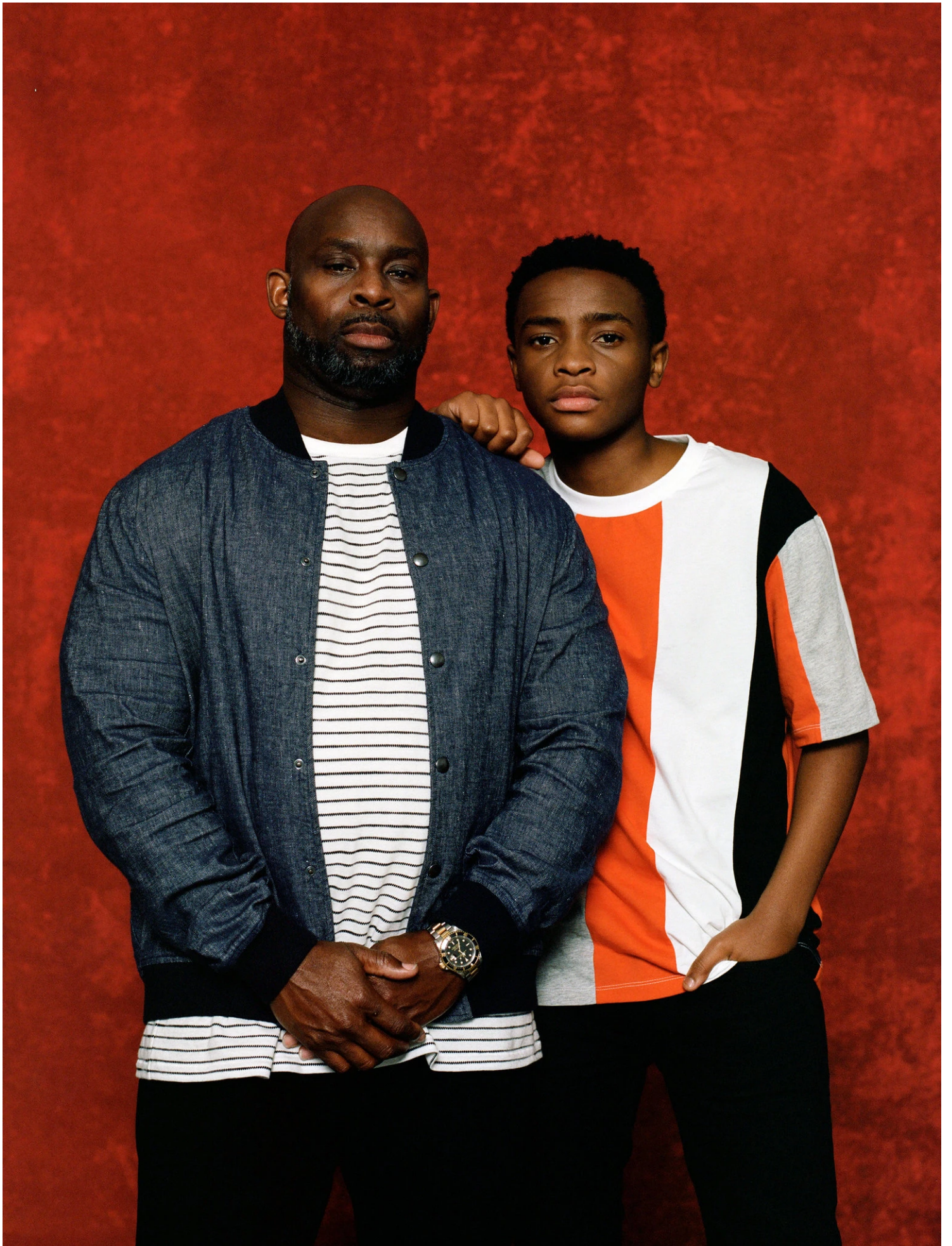
SALAAM We had all gone through hell. But when I saw this series, I immediately realized that we were in paradise compared to the hell that Korey was in. His was unrelenting. I went to jail and I was able to get a college degree. He never got an opportunity to breathe, to meditate, to just say, “Phew, man, that was really crazy today. Let me kick my feet up a little bit and read this magazine.”

That reality — that *pain*, I think, is a better word — is knowing that he came because of me. Offering an “I’m sorry” doesn’t seem adequate. And I’ve been able to say that to him, but I also realized that that’s not adequate enough to know what he went through, or that he could have been killed in prison. He almost was. It’s not enough. And I have a direct role to play in that.

HERISSE It was emotionally taxing at times [to embody that weight]. I feel like I speak for all of us when I say that we just wanted to get it right. We really want to tell their truth as best as possible for these men, for this story. This is the justice that they didn’t get in ’89.

SALAAM I knew how big [this series would be]. And I knew how small [our story had] become. I say that because when we were found innocent, there was no tsunami of media that followed in the way that tsunami came out within the first few weeks when they thought we were guilty. The criminal justice system says that you’re innocent until proven guilty. But if you’re black or brown, you are guilty and have to prove yourself innocent. And I think that is the difference, that two Americas that is often talked about. There are so many components that let you down.

Antron McCray and Caleel Harris



McCray was 15 years old when he was arrested and served six years in prison. Though he maintained his innocence, his father, Bobby (played by Michael K. Williams), convinced him to tell the police what they wanted to hear, believing that they would let him go.

HARRIS I did get “the talk” from my parents, and I was somewhat aware of how this country is run. But as a teenager, I’m still figuring out how this world is operated and just learning about this case and meeting these men — it opened my eyes a lot as to what’s really happening and how far we still have to go.

McCRAY [Watching the series] was hard to get through. [Caleel] did a great job. Actually, he did too good. It took me right back, because my father was my best friend, my hero at the time. And it was real painful. I cried on my wife’s shoulders. I don’t know when was the last time I cried.

I struggle with [my feelings toward my father]. Sometimes I love him. Most of the time, I hate him. I lost a lot, you know, for something I didn’t do. He just flipped on me, and I just can’t get past that. It’s real hard. I did seven and a half years [including time spent detained during the trial] for something I didn’t do, and I just can’t get over it.

I’m damaged, you know? I know I need help. But I feel like I’m too old to get help now. I’m 45 years old, so I’m just focused on my kids. I’m not saying it’s the right thing to do. I just stay busy. I stay in the gym. I ride my motorcycle. But it eats me up every day. Eats me alive. My wife is trying to get me help but I keep refusing. That’s just where I’m at right now. I don’t know what to do.

HARRIS I really wanted to capture his pain, and those conflicting emotions that he was going through during this trial. I really wanted to be so clear that he knew that he was right and that he stood for the truth, and that he had hope because he knew what the truth was. It’s that youthful innocence that I wanted to capture in my character.

McCRAY [Ava] came to my house. She spoke to me about what happened to me. She listened to me. Everything that I told her, she brought it to life and everything. She listened to everything I had to say. And I appreciated it.

Kevin Richardson and Asante Blackk



“I want everybody to know that we’re survivors of this and we don’t want to see another Central Park Five,” said Richardson, right.
Brad Ogbonna for The New York Times

Richardson was 14 years old when he was arrested, and served seven years in prison.

RICHARDSON This whole thing was a therapeutic process. PTSD is real and I go through that. People might think on the outside looking in that I’m doing swell because we got the settlement. That doesn’t erase the time that I did. We always say we have invisible scars nobody sees. And no matter how you cover it, the scab will keep coming off.

The settlement didn’t really mean anything. Just to tell people we told you so from the beginning — that’s all we wanted.

BLACKK It was a challenge trying to snap out of the emotions [on set]. It was really easy to feel the pressure of what was happening, but once “cut” was called — in the courtroom scenes I found myself still angry and still really emotional. I couldn’t even imagine myself going through what you went through, and it made me angry for you. This should have never happened.

RICHARDSON It’s a struggle that I deal with every day. But I didn’t want to be an older, bitter man, even though I am angry, yes. But we did want to channel that energy and turn this to something positive so we could build for our future generation.

BLACKK These five guys are human. They’re not the “wolf pack,” the monsters they were portrayed as by the media in 1989. These are guys that have families, that have goals, aspirations, things they want to do with their lives, and they shouldn’t just be brought down to a headline or something to be afraid of because they’re not at all.

If you see something and it confirms your biases, you might want to take a step back before you jump to a conclusion, because there’s a huge chance it isn’t true.

RICHARDSON That’s why I love the title “When They See Us.” When they see us as black and brown people, we’re judged already from the color of our skin. So like Asante said, take a step back and think.

I want everybody to know that we’re survivors of this and we don’t want to see another Central Park Five. We don’t want to see another Scottsboro Boys. We don’t want to see another Emmett Till.

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