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Tankleff: Cops made my life 'hell' for 17 years

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Speaking for the first time as an accuser in a legal case instead of as the accused, Martin Tankleff Tuesday vowed to uncover what he said was a plague of misconduct in Suffolk County law enforcement that made his life "hell" for more than 17 years.

"Now it's my turn to be on the offense," Tankleff said Tuesday, hours after his attorneys filed a 38-page federal lawsuit against Suffolk County. "This lawsuit will get to the bottom of what happened to me and my family."

The 11-count lawsuit accuses the county, as well as specific investigators, of a long pattern of violating the civil rights of criminal defendants, including by coercing false confessions like the one Tankleff said led to him being convicted of his parents' murders.

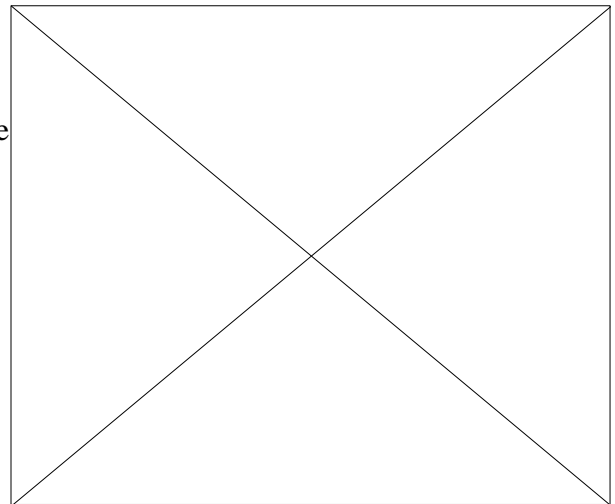
Hours after the 1988 stabbing and bludgeoning deaths of Seymour and Arlene Tankleff, detectives zeroed in on Martin Tankleff - 17 at the time - as their only suspect. Tankleff initially denied killing his parents, but later confessed after Suffolk homicide Det. K. James McCready told him that Seymour had awakened from his coma and accused his son of the attacks. Martin Tankleff almost immediately recanted his confession, which he never signed.

In 1990, a jury found Tankleff guilty of his parents' murders, and he was sentenced to 50 years to life in prison. In 2007, an appellate court overturned his conviction, ruling that a lower court did not properly consider new evidence brought forth by Tankleff's legal team. That evidence suggested that Seymour Tankleff's business partner, Jerry Steurman, hired a pair of hit men to kill the Tankleffs.

Steurman has always denied involvement in the murders.

Tankleff's suit accuses Suffolk police of never seriously investigating Steurman, who was in heavy debt to Seymour Tankleff and faked his death and went into hiding after the murders, because they had already coerced a bogus confession out of Tankleff.

Garden City attorney Bruce Barket, who also represents Tankleff, said the suit could also help uncover new evidence of the Tankleffs' real killers because it allows Tankleff's legal team subpoena powers that would compel witnesses, including Steurman, to testify. In a statement, Suffolk County Attorney



Christine Malafi said Tuesday that she looked "forward to vigorously defending the county and its taxpayers in the lawsuit."

The suit emphasizes that the county's misdoings were not isolated to Tankleff's case. It cites investigations of Suffolk police in the 1980s by the Suffolk County Bar Association, the State Commission of Investigation and by Newsday, which uncovered questionable investigative practices.

"This lawsuit is not about what happened in the Tankleff case. We already know that," said Tankleff's attorney, Barry Scheck, during a news conference at his Manhattan law office. "This lawsuit is about why it happened. . . . Martin Tankleff's case was an injustice waiting to happen."

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