

TV

## Mehcad Brooks on how his 1st police brutality experience at age 7 influences his 'Law & Order' character

"Law & Order's" newest detective has been in therapy for the incidents, he says.



Mariska Hargitay, Mehcad Brooks reveal story behind 'Law & Order' set pics

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**By Randee Dawn**

Trouble is coming for Detective Jalen Shaw on "Law & Order" this week. And it feels like the show's newest detective just got here!

In "The System," the fall finale that airs Dec. 8, Shaw's going to have to face his conduct as a police officer after a murder suspect he arrested escapes custody, and he's accused of coercing a false confession.

But as Mehcad Brooks, who plays Detective Shaw, tells TODAY.com, the heart-to-heart Shaw is going to have with himself over how to be a policeman reflects some of his own searching when he first took on the “L&O” role.

As he explains, it’s all part of a “healing journey” he’s been on for years.

“There’s definitely a healing journey I’m going through myself,” says Brooks, 42. “I had my first introduction to police brutality when I was 7 years old. It was a throughline through the rest of my life. ... And it’s come to visit me a few times. At no time did I deserve it.”

The lived experiences he had in his personal life with police he says “were traumatic enough” for him “to have to go into therapy about them.”

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MEHCAD BROOKS

His goal, he says, was to avoid passing them on to any future children he might have or making them part of his personality. But seeing George Floyd’s murder captured on a cellphone camera in 2020 refocused that journey.

And the opportunity to play a Black cop on TV was “something very much in alignment” with Brooks’ “morals and values and principles about the type of world” he wants to “create,” he says. “There are times when Shaw has the choice of being rough with a suspect. I choose not to do that. It can be more ‘fun’ to do it that way (as an actor), but I don’t because I understand what it feels like to have it done to you. And as Mehdad heals, it informs Shaw.”



— Mehdad Brooks (Detective Jalen Shaw) on "Law & Order." Heidi Gutman / NBC

"The System," he says, was a script that left him "pleasantly surprised," because it deals with "the system being unfairly slanted against people of color."

"That's something I'm very proud of about the show, and to see that we're not shying away from," he adds. "They've really nailed certain parts of the Black experience in America when it comes to fighting a system that was set up to steal our joy and freedom in some cases. This episode really touches upon that."

"Law & Order" first started airing in 1990, when the young Brooks was only about 10 years old, and by 13 he says it was "always on in the house," along with shows like "Dragnet" and "Perry Mason."



— Brooks as Detective Shaw. He says he grew up wanting to be a NYPD policeman. Zach Dilgard / NBC



“It’s been in my family’s cultural zeitgeist since I was a child,” he says. Though he grew up in Austin, Texas, Brooks’ mother is from New York, and he can recall “wanting so badly to be a New York cop,” but as he got older, he thought, “I’m not cut out for that.”

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But when he appeared as a guest star on “Law & Order: SVU” in 2011 as a victim of sexual assault, he had an inkling it wouldn’t be his only turn in the series.

“About 10, 11 years ago I did an episode of ‘SVU’ and I was in makeup with Mariska (Hargitay, who plays Olivia Benson on the show), and she said, ‘Maybe you’ll come back as a cop.’ True story.”

And when he did finally land the role, he recalls exactly where he was and what he did: on a group Zoom chat with his team. “I remember falling on the ground like a child, on my back and kicking my legs up,” he laughs. “I understand how unique this position is and what an honor it is – and I was humbled by it. I’m having the time of my life.”

## Mariska Hargitay on addressing Olivia Benson's trauma in 'SVU' Season 24



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Randee Dawn (she/her) is an entertainment journalist and author based in Brooklyn. In addition to writing for TODAY.com, Variety and The Los Angeles Times, her debut novel, *Tune in Tomorrow*, about a reality TV show run by mythic creatures, published in 2022. She's also the co-author of *The Law & Order: SVU Unofficial Companion*. When not interviewing the stars or dabbling in speculative fiction, she dreams of the next place she can travel to, or cuddles her Westie. More at [RandeeDawn.com](https://RandeeDawn.com).