

Black Lives Matter protest comes to Greene

BY KATHLEEN BORRELLI
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Solidarity was the name of the game at Saturday's Black Lives Matter protest in downtown Stanardsville. Organized by local mother-daughter duo Martha and Madeleine Ledford, roughly 60 people came out to show their support near the Blue Ridge Heritage memorial on Main Street, holding signs and sharing in discourse on racial inequality.

Nearly all participants wore face masks and remained aware of social distancing within the group during the course of the protest.

Madeleine Ledford, who has participated in protests before but never as an organizer, said she and her mom felt driven to create this event by recent events

around the country.

"There was no specific instance that prompted us to act, but more of a building of a need to speak out in support of racial justice and Black Lives Matter," Ledford said. "As to organizing this event locally, it is so important to show up for your own community. Larger protests are taking place all over America and small towns stepping forth to show their support is a vital part of the fight for racial justice."

Ledford said that growing up, her mom was always a strong role model who encouraged her to speak up for what she believed in.

"When I told her I was just going to go by myself and stand there in solidarity holding my 'Black Lives Matter' sign, she said no," Ledford said. "We made the event and sent it out there. All mothers were called to

action when George Floyd called out for his mama with his dying breaths."

Despite the fact that the event was only publicized the day before, Ledford said she was pleased with the turnout. "Having so many people show in under 24 hours really exemplifies how much support there is in Greene for the Black Lives Matter movement," she said.

Jan Helmuth, who retired last year from teaching in Greene County public schools after 24 years, said she came out to show her support for the Black community in Greene.

"I know that white [privilege] exists in Greene County, and I want to show the members of our Black community that there are people who support them," she said.

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PHOTO BY KATHLEEN BORRELLI/GREENE COUNTY RECORD

Rising William Monroe High School seniors Quinn Henkel and Sarah Earle show their support at their first local community protest.

Protest

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"We think it's important to be present," said Nicole Hark of Ruckersville, whose three small children also attended the protest, sporting hand-drawn signs and cloth face masks. Hark says the protests have sparked a lot of discussion with the children, who are at a great age for curiosity and learning.

Erin VanDoren and daughter Marley, a rising seventh-grader at William Monroe Middle School, said they came out because "it's important that we change the pattern of our history to make America better."

One local mom who preferred to remain anonymous said she felt it was important for her daughter to see events like this happening locally. Admitting she feared retaliation if she was outspoken on this divisive issue, she shared that racism "is hard to talk about with children; you have a fear you might say the wrong thing, but it's important to have those hard conversations."

The chairs from both the Greene County Democrats and the Greene Republican Committee were in attendance.

Mark Heinicke, chair of the Democratic Party in Greene County, said "we have an insane situation in this country right now, but we've got to get the leaders to listen, especially business leaders. Those are the people who pull the strings in Washington; those are the people who can do things."

Although he has been practicing social distancing and also wore a cloth face mask, Heinicke felt that the Black Lives Matter protest was worth coming out for.

"Well, we need bodies. I didn't have time to make up a sign; I just found out about this. We're doing social distancing and staying at home and I have to be careful what I do, but I came for this."

Steve Kruskamp, chair of the Republican Committee of Greene County, was pleased that the chairs of both major parties could be a part of the same movement.

"We can all get behind this 100 percent," Kruskamp said. "That's what we should do. I think that's the big push out of both parties is just communication. Greene deserves that; it's a great community. It's sad that this is happening, but we have an opportunity to make things better, so I'm excited to be here and excited to engage in conversation."

"I truly believe Greene's a unique place," he continued. "I think there's a huge opportunity for Greene to show the rest of the state and even the rest of the country how we can kind of move forward from this and heal from this. It's a tragedy; it's horrific; it's horrible. But it's great that we can all stand up, regardless of political affiliation, religious affiliation, or anything else; we can all stand up and agree that any form of bigotry and hate is not welcome here. That is a message that is loud and clear that I'm hearing through my neighbors, other Greene residents ... As someone who moved here from Baltimore, it's just really encouraging to go from such an urban environment to a rural environment and see even a more positive outlook, so this is great."

Grace Cangialosi, a retired woman who saw the protest while shopping at the farmer's market in the nearby pavilion, said she just had to stop by. Despite two knee replacements, she

grabbed a towel and came over to "take a knee," even if only for a few minutes in the heat of the afternoon.

"I was in Page County for 20 years, and they had never had a Martin Luther King Day celebration," Cangialosi recalled. "When some high school girls went to the principal's office on that day and asked if they could do an announcement, he said if you're not back in class in 10 minutes you'll be suspended." After that, Cangialosi got involved and is happy to say that 25 years later those MLK Day celebrations are still happening in Page County. She hopes that actions like the protest on June 6 will help bring more awareness to Greene County as well.

One local Black resident, who lives within eyesight of the protest, walked over to join in the conversation on how he personally faced discrimination in the Greene County criminal justice system.

Maurice Faulkner, who in 2008-2009 spent 19 months in jail on charges that were ultimately dropped, shared his personal experience of the officers who arrested him, the lawyer who refused to share his evidence with him during his wait to be tried, and the witness who ended up not showing up in court on the day of the trial. He described how his court-appointed lawyer tried to convince him to accept a plea bargain but ultimately resigned from the case, and proclaimed that he lost two years of his life that he will never get back due to unfair assumptions based on the color of his skin.

"I was born and raised in Greene County, and they wanted me off the

street because I'm Black," Faulkner said.

"I'm kind of proud of Greene County," said one local business owner when she saw how many people showed up in support of the protest. "I run a business here, and I've had people (tell) me that they don't come to us because I display resistance bumper stickers and things like that."

The woman, who preferred to remain anonymous because of her business, said she was touched to see how many turned up to show their support.

"Most of the time, you're singing to the choir because the people you talk to, they think like you do ... I'm really glad to see all the people coming together across the whole world—not just the United States—during these protests. It's not just Black people, it's everybody. We live in a really conservative area, so I'm surprised; this is really beyond what I expected."

Sheriff Steve Smith stopped by the protest to show his support and also had deputies patrolling every half hour to ensure nobody caused a problem for the peaceful protesters.

"I am in a position where I've got to treat everybody the same," Smith said. "We're here for the community; we're not here to hurt anybody."

In response to questions about what's been happening across the nation recently, Smith simply said, "It's good for people to protest—that's their First Amendment right—but I don't agree with the violence. What's



PHOTO BY KATHLEEN BORRELLI/GREENE COUNTY RECORD

Left, Jo Thompkins of Ruckersville joined the protestors holding signs alongside Main street Saturday morning. Center, Erica Hagan said "I just wanted to show our support for the black community and tell them that we're listening and that we're here and that we're not going to be quiet about what's going on." Right, Samantha Lawler of Stanardsville says she wants "to let our black community know that we're here to support them and that we're ready to make changes alongside them as well."



PHOTO BY KATHLEEN BORRELLI/GREENE COUNTY RECORD

From right to left, mom Nicole Hark with children Preston, 5, Abby, 3, and Eleanor, 18 months, sport a hand-drawn sign. Mom used the protest as a learning experience to talk to her children about the importance of recognizing differences and speaking up for change.

good about this community is just people coming together to do stuff like this."

Ledford wants to encourage everyone to check out the local events page on Facebook, as

many other rallies of support are being hosted this weekend in Greene and the surrounding counties by different organizers.

"I would like to reiterate the importance of supporting Black Lives

Matter and using whatever power and energy you have to do so," she said. "Uplifting each other and listening to the voices that go too often unheard is how we can move forward together."



PHOTO BY KATHLEEN BORRELLI/GREENE COUNTY RECORD

Mike Bayman and Shauna Moss, who used to live in Greene County but now live in Gordonsville, said they heard about the rally at the last minute and just had to be there. "Posting things on Facebook and staying at home is one thing, but going out and taking action, showing your support, is more important," Bayman said.



PHOTO BY KATHLEEN BORRELLI/GREENE COUNTY RECORD

Paul sports a hand-made Black Lives Matter t-shirt. Fellow protestors were nice enough to find a Frisbee to share their water with dog Penny in the summer heat.

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