6-3-20 Issue

Protest in Rocky Mount held Sunday

Sherese Gore

Smith Mountain Eagle

Franklin County counted itself among a number of communities across the nation to be the sites of demonstrations against racism and police brutality.

A protest Sunday in Rocky Mount followed the death of an unarmed black man, George Floyd, who died May 25 after a Minneapolis police officer held a knee on Floyd’s neck for more than eight minutes.

A mixture of black and white protestors lined a section of Franklin Street with people holding signs conveying messages such as “Black Lives Matter,” “I am not a threat,” and “Silence is Violence.”

Whenever a passing vehicle would honk in support, cheers would erupt from the gathering.

The event in Rocky Mount was organized by three young Franklin County residents, Bryce Hall, Jayanna Fuller and Chloe Newbill.

Hall said he helped to spearhead the event because he wanted to bring light to issues that are affecting the world today and to bring together people who are allies.

Franklin County is “better off than most places, but we’re still not where we want to be as it deals with racism,” Hall said.

One of the protestors was Cara Spivey, who said she was in attendance because “I have white privilege.”

“There are many things I don’t have to experience in my daily life because of the color of my skin,” Spivey said. “I think it’s important that all of us recognize that and stand with our black neighbors in the sense that something needs to change.”

Protestor Delaughn Wright attended the event with her son Rylin, 6. Wright said she has personally experienced racism and discrimination in Franklin County.

“My son, I gotta stand for him,” Wright said. “Who else is going to be behind him, supporting him as much as I can? And I’m carrying a black child, and they think we don’t matter, but we do. Somebody has to do something.”

Jessica Ransom led a prayer over the protestors.

“Change has to happen, and it has to start with one person,” Ransom said. “I’m proud of each and everyone of you young people that I see standing out here. I’m sorry that you live in a world that should have been fixed years ago. Police are not all bad. Black people are not all criminals. And all white people are not all racists … You’re part of the change. You’re going to be what impacts our future.”

8-10-20 issue

Protests continue in Rocky Mount for second week

Sherese Gore

Smith Mountain Eagle

In the shadow of a statue commemorating Confederate soldiers, a mixed race crowd of people rallied against racial injustice and called for a more equitable society.

Rocky Mount was the site of another peaceful protest last week as people assembled on the lawn of the Franklin County Courthouse. A portion of the demonstration June 3 was marked by protestors kneeling or lying on the ground, an act that memorialized the death of George Floyd, an unarmed black man who was killed when a white Minneapolis police officer kneeled on his neck for almost nine minutes.

Before the protest made its way to the Rocky Mount Farmers’ Market, some participants spoke about their own interactions with the police, whether negative or positive, and their personal experiences with racism.

“I am so happy with the turnout,” said Bridgette Craighead, an organizer of the event. “My heart is overfilled with joy. I want to cry so bad but cry tears of joy because I feel like this is the beginning of the end of racism.”

Craighead said the protest was held at the courthouse because “right here where we’re at, this is the heart of racism in our county.”

Craighead said she’s seen white people receive lesser sentences than black people for the same crime, and she spoke about the effect harsh sentencing has had on her own family.

“I’m here to break generational curses on our people,” Craighead said. “... I came here because I feel like this is the heart, this is where the most blood and the most tears have been shed.”

Franklin County Sheriff Bill Overton mingled among the crowd of protestors.

Referring to Floyd’s death, Overton said he was sickened by what he saw, but he is grateful that people’s voices are being heard and that they are expressing their First Amendment rights.

“All of us should be hurting from this,” he said. “So now the next thing is, how do we heal, and then again, how do we come together and make lasting change?”

According to Overton, about 10 percent of his department of about 100 are non-white. He said he met with minority deputies after the Floyd incident, and they expressed to him “that they were really hurting” and were “concerned and upset that all of the other officers that were there, nobody stepped in themselves to stop what they were witnessing.”

Continued training was discussed, he said, adding that law enforcement officers have many tools that can be used to affect an arrest without resorting to lethal force or “having to go from that concept of lethal force so quickly."

“We have a job to do, and we can’t deflect from the job that we have to do, but we have to be mindful that we’re peacemakers, and when we go to situations — most every one that we go to — people are finding themselves in a very vulnerable place, they’re upset,” Overton said.

Officers should respond with a desire to help, Overton said, “because we want to de-escalate, not escalate a situation.”

“I think that’s what’s so sad about this, is the fact that it was obvious that this situation was at a place where there was no threat at all — zero threat for it to escalate (to) anything other than a peaceful resolution,” Overton added. “There was no reason for it.”

6-24-20 issue

Peaceful protest held in Westlake Corner

Sherese Gore

Smith Mountain Eagle

Holding signs and breaking out into chants, about 20 people gathered Monday in Westlake Corner to express their support for the Black Lives Matter movement.

An organizer of the event, Katosha Poindexter, said her children “shouldn’t have to deal with something that our ancestors tried to change for us.”

“So I feel like the best thing for me to do is to get out here and make a change,” Poindexter said. “Try to make a change for my family, for my future, for my grandkids, my great-grandkids, forever. Because this is forever. History keeps repeating itself, and I don’t want history to repeat itself in that kind of way.”

The protest was held in a grassy area near the Wendy’s restaurant. Some motorists honked in support of the demonstrators, and Wendy’s employees provided cups of water to participants.

When asked why she took part in the event, Alice Prather spoke about the equality of all humankind.

“So when I learned about this, this is right in my heart, in my soul,” Prather said. “I couldn’t resist being here for a peaceful protest.”

Smith Mountain Lake Democrats President Denise Tuttle said that many of the demonstrators were affiliated with her organization.

“We are out here today mainly to support an effort by our young people protesting with love, and in support of Black Lives Matter,” Tuttle said. “We just feel very strongly that we need to be out here and show our support.”

Among the young people at the event was Kiani Davidson, 16, who said she’d wanted to participate in a protest for a long time.

“We need to get it out there that we are people just like you, no matter your skin color, your race, your religion,” Davidson said. “We are all the same … We’re all God’s perfection, so it’s not right to discriminate against somebody just because of their skin color.”

Davidson said it was beautiful to see the diversity of people at the event. She noted that there were a few instances of obscene gestures or words that were made by passing motorists, “but that’s all part of the process.”

“I think we’re going to get somewhere with this,” she said.

About 30 minutes before the protest was set to end, Chad Gilmore, accompanied by his son Clayton, joined the group. Chad Gilmore said he was ordering dinner and initially was unaware that a protest was underway until he saw the gathering of people. He said he took part in the demonstration as an expression of solidarity.

“We support black lives, brown lives, white lives,” Chad Gilmore said. “We support everyone, and I wanted to stand with my brothers and sisters and show our support.”

9-2-20 issue

March commemorates historic gathering

Sherese Gore

Smith Mountain Eagle

A Walk for Justice was held Friday by Black Lives Matter in Franklin County to commemorate the historic 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

Led by children holding a banner, a diverse group marched from the area of Mary Elizabeth Park in Rocky Mount to the lawn of the Franklin County courthouse. Traffic control was provided by law enforcement officers. The group later walked to the Rocky Mount Farmers Market where there was music, food and a bounce house for children.

Speakers included the Rev. Walter Lawson, president of the Franklin County NAACP; Penny Blue, a member of the Franklin County School Board; Brenda Hale, president of the Roanoke chapter of the NAACP; and Martinsville Vice Mayor Chad Martin.

Franklin County native Henry Turnage has advocated for the relocation of a Confederate statue from the courthouse grounds. In his remarks, Turnage said the monument, which memorializes Franklin County’s Confederate dead, should receive respect because it honors people’s families; however, “there is no way this statue can stand here and this building does its job.”

The Franklin County Board of Supervisors approved a referendum on the November ballot that will ask voters whether the monument should be moved from its current location to a place of “ appropriate historical significance.” The outcome of the referendum is non-binding, and the board will make a final decision following a public hearing.

The courthouse has never been free of racism, Turnage said.

“My son cannot come here and receive justice the way that a white person’s son can,” he said. “He cannot do it. I cannot even give my son the illusion, because look, he doesn't even have the illusion of a fair trial here.”