

EDUCATION

'I'm not safe here': This teenager won't stop advocating for LGBTQ+ students in Roanoke County

Roanoke County's school board retained its conservative majority in last week's election. Fifteen-year-old Keely Meadows and other advocates want to keep LGBTQ+ rights in the spotlight.



by **Lisa Rowan**

November 13, 2023



Keely Meadows (right, in tan pants) speaks at a demonstration she organized in support of LGBTQ+ students in Roanoke County on Sept. 21. At far right is Sara Newell, a write-in candidate for the Catawba school board seat whose campaign Keely supported. Photo by Lisa Rowan.

Keely Meadows has tried everything. She has calmly pleaded with the Roanoke County School Board to support LGBTQ+ and special education students. She has scolded board members for looking at their phones while she speaks. She has shouted, demanding board chair Brent Hudson apologize for “causing emotional distress” to the LGBTQ+ student community.

And still she feels like no one's listening.

Keely, 15, is one of the youngest advocates for LGBTQ+ students in the school division. But she has repeatedly approached the podium over six months of school board meetings. Barely 5 feet tall, with long brown hair bearing vibrant, neon highlights, she has emerged as a prominent organizer of LGBTQ+ support in conservative Roanoke County.

The county school division has spent much of 2023 embroiled in issues impacting LGBTQ+ students as elections for two of the five spots on its school board approached.

In February, a Glenvar High School student used the public comment period of a school board meeting to accuse a transgender student of recording her in the girls' bathroom; the next month, the accused student responded, also during a meeting.

In May, a parent stood up in front of the board and said there were too many rainbows and other pride-themed symbols at his children's school; the next month, 31 parents, students and division staffers spoke during a 90-minute public comment period in defense of the LGBTQ+ community.

In August, Roanoke County became one of the first school boards in the state to adopt the Youngkin administration's new restrictions on transgender and gender nonconforming students, which limit their rights unless they have parental sign-off.

As crowds at school board meetings swelled and a series of arrests took place, the U.S. Department of Justice's mediation service contacted the division to offer its services. Roanoke County **rejected the offer as it continued to increase law enforcement presence at its monthly meetings.**

The conservative voices in the crowd calling for limitations on gender-affirming care for LGBTQ+ students at school have usually been adults; sometimes speakers say they have a child or grandchild in the division, or that they're simply a concerned resident. They are often affiliated with one of a few local churches that have rallied several rows' worth of attendees to school board meetings. Since June, none of the speakers supporting the new trans student policy have been local students.

The more liberal voices at meetings, meanwhile, have run the gamut. Speakers as young as elementary school age have addressed the board, and some teenagers who attend high school in the county have come back repeatedly to speak. They've been backed by young adults representing local diversity organizations, along with parents and several teachers who have returned again and again.

POLITICS

Virginia's only Palestinian-American legislator condemns Israel's actions in Gaza war

Del. Sam Rasoul has condemned violence against civilians on both sides, but it was his tweet blaming Israel for an explosion at a Gaza hospital that left hundreds dead that sparked controversy online. He walks a fine line with the Democratic Party's pro-Israel stance, political analysts say.



by **Markus Schmidt**
November 6, 2023



Del. Sam Rasoul, D-Roanoke, and his family visit Jericho on the West Bank. Courtesy of Rasoul.

When Hamas terrorists rained thousands of rockets down on Israel last month and infiltrated the country in an unprecedented [surprise attack](#) that killed more than 1,400 Israelis, the region was on the brink of a new war.

More than 6,000 miles away from his ancestral home and with Tuesday's election looming large, Del. Sam Rasoul, D-Roanoke — the only Palestinian-American in Virginia's legislature — suddenly found himself having to navigate a fine line between endorsing President Joe Biden's full public support for Israel and watching the civilian death toll in Gaza climb by the day.

And a recent post by Rasoul on X, the social media platform formerly known as Twitter, in which he chided Israel for the [explosion at a hospital](#) in Gaza that left hundreds dead, sparked an online controversy with more than 150 responses, with at least one X user alleging that Rasoul was spreading " Hamas propaganda which fuels antisemitism."

But Rasoul, whose parents immigrated to the United States in the aftermath of the Six Day War in 1967, and who has visited the West Bank more than half a dozen times, remained unfazed by the public outrage over his tweet. "We try to stay laser-focused on my constituents here in the Roanoke valley and people in the commonwealth," he said in an interview Friday.

However, as a Palestinian-American with many relatives living in the West Bank and a number of friends who remain in Gaza, Rasoul said it is impossible to remain silent in the wake of the loss of innocent lives on both sides during this conflict.

"The first thought is of course any attack on innocent civilians is heinous, and that kind of attack should be condemned," Rasoul said in the interview, referring to the Hamas surprise attack on Israel. "Having grown up with this conflict, you can imagine that attacks like this of course would produce an escalation very quickly."

Since then, the conflict has escalated rapidly, "and sadly approximately 150 children are being killed every single day." Rasoul said. "It's a tough reality, and certainly as a state legislator it's outside of our policy realm, but as human beings we hate to see this kind of pain and suffering."

On Oct. 13 — six days after the Hamas attack on Israeli settlements along the border with Gaza — Rasoul first turned to Facebook, sharing his perspective "as a Palestinian-American ... during this difficult time."

In his statement he called the loss of Palestinian and Israeli lives "heartbreaking," and he denounced the "atrocities committed by Hamas" against Israeli civilians as "reprehensible."



Sam Rasoul
@Sam_Rasoul

Today Israel bombed a hospital and a UN school. War crimes it will never be held accountable for.

Over 1000 children dead in 10 days. Sickening.

 **Jewish Voice for Peace** @jvplive · 10/17/23

The Israeli military just bombed Al-Ahli hospital, where refugees in Gaza were sheltering after being displaced. Over 500 people killed in an instant.

These atrocities must stop. This is genocide. ...

Del. Rasoul's tweet. Screenshot.

CULTURE

A civil rights-era judge was praised for his commitment to segregation. There's still a bridge named after him in Danville.

Judge Archibald Aiken presided over the trials of civil rights protesters arrested in 1963 for demonstrating against segregation. Historians say his discriminatory courtroom practices were extreme even compared to other judges of the era. But he had plenty of fans.



by **Grace Mamon**
November 21, 2023



In 1963, Judge Archibald Aiken presided over a trial in Danville of 138 people facing charges from that year's civil rights protests. Almost all of the defendants came before Aiken in that trial and others related to the protests were Black. List of defendants' names taken from a microfilm image of the court records, photo

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from a microfilm version of Aiken's 1971 obituary. Photo illustration by Brooke Stephenson.

Content warning: Some of the historical texts in this story include racial slurs and racist language.

When the leaders of Danville's civil rights movement are sentenced to jail, there are no spectators in the courtroom gallery. The public has been prohibited from attending trials.

Other than the defendants and their attorneys, there is only the jury, the prosecution, the host of armed policemen, and the 75-year-old judge behind the bench.

Every last one of them is white.

It is 1963, and hundreds of mostly Black demonstrators have been arrested for protesting segregation. They must now face a trial presided over by Judge Archibald Aiken, a segregationist state court judge known to operate outside the law.

The demonstrators were arrested on charges including contempt, trespassing, disorderly conduct, parading without a permit and resisting arrest.

Aiken's methods were praised by many, including U.S. Senator Harry Byrd, the leader of Virginia's massive resistance campaign that led to the closure of some public schools in the 1950s.

But everyone in Danville's Black community knew that Aiken was a segregationist, said Karice Luck-Brimmer, a local historian and genealogist who leads Black history tours around the city.

"On my tours, I always say the '63 crew were essentially tried by the KKK," Luck-Brimmer said.

While some of Aiken's discriminatory courtroom practices were common throughout the South, others were extreme even among other segregationist judges, said Thomas Frampton, a professor at the University of Virginia School of Law who specializes in the intersections of criminal law and race inequalities.

"The proceedings in Danville courtrooms were extraordinary, even by the standards of what one might expect in a Southern, segregationist courtroom," Frampton said. "It's very, very clear that the white legal establishment, from the Danville Bar Association to the judiciary, profoundly failed to do right by the Black population of Danville."

A bridge in Danville remains named after Aiken today.

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