

Racial injustice prompts protest led by students

Unsolved 2018 hate crime at African Meeting House addressed

By John Lavenburg

jlavenburg@inkym.com More than 100 islanders, most of them students, gathered at Tom Nevers Field Monday night to peacefully protest racism and racial injustice in America.

The protest was sparked by the May 25 death of George Floyd – an unarmed black man – who died while in custody of the Minneapolis Police Department, an officer kneeling on his neck, at the age of 46.

The protest was organized by current and former Nantucket High School students and led by three students who spoke to a crowd of people, mostly in their cars, many of whom held out signs that read statements like, “I Can’t Breathe,” “No Justice, No Peace,” “Black Lives Matter” and “Hands Up Don’t Shoot.”

Britney Anderson, the first of the students to speak, felt an obligation

to get in front of the crowd.

“I feel like it’s necessary to speak out,” said Anderson, who graduated last June. “I feel like if you’re being silent then you’re on the side of the oppressor.”

She spoke with a megaphone, standing in the bed of a pickup truck with the other two speakers by her side. Her speech described her feelings as a sister, cousin, niece and aunt of black men and children.

“I can’t breathe. That’s what George Floyd said over and over again. That could easily be any of my brothers saying, I can’t breathe. My cousins saying, I can’t breathe. My uncles saying, I can’t breathe, or my

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– Johnny Sussek Protester

Protest: “White people must try to empathize”

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nephew saying, I can’t breathe,” Anderson said.

As she continued to speak she mentioned Nantucket specifically. She stated the importance for everyone to speak out, even though the island is different than other communities around the country.

“We are affected, and we have to feel for our fellow black brothers and sisters that are endangered,” she said. “Just because it has not impacted us directly doesn’t mean we shouldn’t take a stand.”

The other speakers were Johnny Sussek and Liela Marrett. They too spoke about the importance of people of all races coming together.

A call for unity

“Why has it been two years since someone committed a hate crime at the African Meeting House? It’s 2020. This is embarrassing. Our community needs to do better within itself,” she said.

The case was turned over to the State Police for investigation after allegations were made that the culprit was the child of a member of the police department.

“It wouldn’t be responsible for me as a police chief to investigate an incident in what people believe we were involved,” Pittman said. “I think I know who did it, to be honest with you, but I don’t have the facts and it’s out of my hands.” The case is still active.

Rosemary Samuels also spoke about her son, Christopher, who was struck by a car when he was 12 while riding his bike at the intersection of Surfside and

“As non-black allies, all white people must try their hardest to empathize, try to feel a fraction of the pain and most importantly use their platform and their privileges to fight for justice,” said Sussek, who lives with his family on Nantucket but graduated this year from the Peddie School in New Jersey.

Marrett, a senior, added that people of all races need to feel as uncomfortable as the black community.

“We’ll only see change when our allies feel as uncomfortable as we do and call out the injustices like we’ve been doing for centuries.”

The speeches lasted about 20 minutes with multiple interruptions of applause and chants of support from the crowd.

Afterward, there was a procession of cars from Tom Nevers to Main Street. Some people drove through downtown honking their horns in a sign of solidarity. Others parked where they could and participated in an eightminute, 46-second kneel on the cobblestones – the amount time the Minneapolis police officer had his knee on Floyd’s neck. There were chants of “I can’t breathe” throughout.

The kneel concluded the protest. High school assistant girls’ basketball coach and island resident Delroy Lawrence said from start to finish the event showed what the island community is all about.

“I like this man, actually I love it,” Lawrence said. “The fact that we have high-school students who can put something like this together and the community can come out and support it just kind of shows the type of community we have and what we can do out here.”

There was no a police presence at any part of the protest. The only officers in the area were monitoring the traffic on Milestone Road.

Police questioned on two 2018 cases Police chief Bill Pittman said everything turned out as the department anticipated it would, and no officers were present because no trouble was expected.

“The Nantucket community is a great community,” Pittman said. “These people are passionate. Nantucket has a very high level of people who are socially aware of what’s going on in the world and they did the right thing. They expressed their views and concerns.”

There were two moments during the Tom Nevers protest, however, when people questioned the

Bartlett roads Aug. 1, 2018. The driver was never found.

“We’ve been going to the police station for a year and a half now and nothing,” Samuels said. “If it takes me until my grave I’m going to fight for my son and all those kids that have been exploited by the Nantucket Police Department.”

Pittman refuted Samuels’ comments. He said the department thoroughly investigated the case, and a false narrative has been created about how it was handled.

“Rosemary is a very decent individual. I just think she is wrapped up in an issue with some people who have pushed her for whatever reason into a false narrative,” he said. **Minorities underrepresented in police department** Only two of the police department’s 40 year-around officers are minorities: both black. The other 38 all identify as white. Those two officers account for 5 percent of the department’s officers, while minorities make up nearly 30 percent of the island’s population.

Pittman acknowledged that the police department doesn’t reflect the ethnic makeup of the community, but said that it’s not for a lack of trying.

“Like every other police department in the country the efforts to hire minorities and underrepresented populations are difficult because often times they don’t want to be police officers and we’re not hiring people that don’t want to be police officers,” he said.

The island’s diverse population was clearly in evidence Monday. People of different races and backgrounds were not there just to protest, but to support the students many have known for years.

High-school teacher and coach Andrew Viselli was there in support of the students he’s seen walking the halls for years now.

“It’s a student protest and I wanted to show them my support,” Viselli said. “I think they’re pretty politically active and they’re socially aware and they want their voices heard and this is a great way to do it.”

Nantucket Police Department's handling of cases involving black people on the island.

Anderson first brought up the vandalism of the African Meeting House in 2018, when lewd and racist graffiti was spray-painted on the historic building. No arrests have been made in the case.



Racist and lewd graffiti was spray-painted on the African Meeting House in March 2018. The case remains unsolved.

Photo by Jen Cohen