

Bethlehem Saturday demonstration peaceful but angry

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing May 31, 2020

🌿 *Latest in a series of posts on the George Floyd killing* 🌿



photo by Dana Grubb

from Kurt Bresswein, “Hundreds pack together for Bethlehem protest against police brutality.” lehighvalleylive.com, May 30, 2020.

Chants of “Black lives matter” and “No justice, no peace” carried through Bethlehem streets Saturday as hundreds of people packed together in solidarity to protest police brutality against people of color.

The group gathered at 3 p.m. at the Bethlehem Rose Garden on the Lehigh County side of the city, then marched east on Broad Street to Payrow Plaza between City Hall and the public library.

Rallies at both ends bookended the march, which shut down intersections as it passed. At City Hall, protesters blocked New and Church streets so no traffic — a LANTA bus included for a time — could pass.

Eventually, city police who have their headquarters in the City Hall basement responded to block off intersections around the rally and help motorists stuck in the jam.

“I know this is really risky during a pandemic, but I’m willing to take that risk to put this important message and these important people out there because of what’s going on, because this has been going on for so long and it just has to stop,” organizer Matty Fall told lehighvalleylive.com. “I feel I have an obligation to step up and say something.”

Saturday’s protest came together in one day, after Fall woke up Friday and knew she had to take action, she said. Her friend Michael Henriquez created a flier that organizers posted around Bethlehem and shared on social media. Helping to spread the word were grassroots groups with local members, like POWER Lehigh Valley, Make the Road PA, Lehigh Valley Stands Up, Lehigh Valley Democratic Socialists of America and Lehigh Valley Anarchists.

Participants were urged to socially distance themselves and wear masks. Many, but not all, complied as they crammed elbow to elbow for the rallies and march. Some brought children, some brought dogs. Many carried protest signs decrying police brutality and urging remembrance of Floyd and a host others before him who have been killed.

“We’re not trying to do anything violent,” Fall said. “We’re not trying to invoke any kind of violence. We don’t condone it at all.”

“We’re really just trying to get the message across that this can’t keep happening,” she continued. “We don’t want this to happen here or anywhere for that matter.”

Fall is a 2017 graduate of Liberty High School who earned an associate's degree in criminal justice from Northampton Community College and is now studying criminal justice management at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City with plans to attend law school.

from Tom Shortell, "Bethlehem, Allentown protests against Minneapolis police killing of George Floyd draw hundreds of peaceful demonstrators." Morning Call, May 30, 2020.

The spark that ignited outrage over the police killing of an unarmed black man in Minneapolis on Memorial Day reached the Lehigh Valley on Saturday, with demonstrators in Bethlehem's Rose Garden and downtown Allentown demanding an end to police brutality.

Speakers called on the community to demand justice and changes in the way police interact with people of color. They also told the audience to use the ballot box to effect change.

"We don't just want you to vote," said one. "We want you to get angry and vote out all the people who don't care about us."

Rafia Sayed of Easton marveled at the turnout as she and friends marched across the Broad Street Bridge in Bethlehem in a crowd that stretched for three blocks. The protest was her first, but she felt compelled to attend after watching another high-profile video of a black man dying in police custody.

"It's like all Bethlehem showed up," she said.

The Bethlehem rally was organized by POWER Lehigh Valley, Make the Road PA, Lehigh Valley Stands Up, Lehigh Valley Democratic Socialists of America and Lehigh Valley Anarchists.

Around 4 p.m., the crowd entered Payrow Plaza by City Hall, to the sounds of cheers and honking horns. All along the way, police were out of sight, giving the protesters a wide berth. But at City Hall, police were present and silent, even as some hurled insults at them. Organizers lined up as a barricade between police and protesters, keeping the protest peaceful even as it was angry.