

Police reform rally at Payrow yesterday

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing May 3, 2021

 *Latest in a series of posts in the wake of the George Floyd murder* 

Note that City Council candidate Hillary Kwiatek was a speaker. And that we have covered the Christian Hall and Stephen Hughes incidents in these pages.

selections from [Sarah M. Wojcik, “Dozens remember victims of police violence — and discuss what to do next — at Bethlehem rally.” Morning Call, May 2, 2021.](#)

When the summer’s weekly Black Lives Matter rallies across the Lehigh Valley slowed to a stop in the fall and winter, racial justice organizers continued to work. Now they’re putting that work on display, and emphasizing what they want people to focus on next.

“This didn’t stop,” Annisa Amatul, 23, of Easton said at a rally Sunday in Bethlehem’s Payrow Plaza as she clutched a painted portrait of Breonna Taylor, who was killed by police in March 2020 in Louisville, Kentucky. “Activists have still been working very hard.”

An activist since high school who has begun working with the racial advocacy nonprofit Lehigh Valley Stands Up, Amatul hoped to demonstrate that — and the next chapter of the moment — during a Say Their Names: A Police Violence Memorial rally that attracted more than 70 people. Attendees stood in silence in remembrance of those killed by police, and heard from organization leaders about what they should focus on next: policy and politics.

Participants placed flowers in front of three photos of area men killed by police: Joseph Santos, who was [shot by former South Whitehall officer Jonathan Roselle in July 2018](#); Christian Hall, [who was shot by state police in December in East Stroudsburg](#); and Stephen Hughes, who was [shot in March while wielding a knife](#) in his Berks County home.

Jon Irons, who helped organize the rally, said Lehigh Valley Stands Up has been focusing on finding and supporting candidates aligned with the movement's values, and encouraging residents to vote in local races. Proactive policy changes within local police departments are key, he said, but so is the push to divert police budget funds to other social programs.

“There's no scarcity of funds here, it's just going to the wrong place,” Irons said. “We need to come together as a community and show there are viable alternatives [to the status quo].”

Neil Ren, a 26-year-old from Macungie, said the serendipity of having major political races in the Lehigh Valley, including for Allentown and Bethlehem mayor, while the Black Lives Matter movement's concerns remain prominent should not be ignored.

“What it boils down to is that the Lehigh Valley is in a position to be a leader on this issue,” Ren said.

The local candidates who spoke during the event and who were endorsed by the nonprofit include Lehigh County commissioner candidate Zachary Cole Borghi, Easton City Council candidate Taiba Sultana, Allentown City Council candidate Justan Parker Fields, **Bethlehem City Council candidate Hilary Kwiatek** and Allentown mayoral candidate Ce-Ce Gerlach.

Kwiatek, who is white, said that knocking on doors across Bethlehem made her realize how hungry her fellow residents are for change and racial justice. The movement, she said she's learned, should not only be championed by people of color.

“And to my fellow white community members I say: This work is our work,” Kwiatek said.

Rick Dow, 73, of Bethlehem, agreed with Kwiatek's belief that the activism has to extend beyond people of color. Dow described himself as a “white guy with privilege” and said that educating himself on this point has helped him learn about where and how he can be an ally for people of color.

Dow, a member of the Lehigh Valley Quakers, has been a part of a group that stands with Black Lives Matter signs every Friday outside the Lehigh Valley Friends Meeting House on Route 512. Dow said the group gets honks of approval from some drivers but no shortage of angry shouts from others.

Wesley, who is Black, noticed a few Bethlehem officers on bicycles watching the rally from afar and the occasional presence of some of the city's mounted unit.

Officers stand by to assist such rallies, but try to keep a low profile to prevent escalation, Bethlehem police Chief Michelle Kott said last month.

Wesley said that while he understands that, he also wishes it didn't make it feel like there was an enormous divide between his community and law enforcement. "When they're way over there, it keeps this feeling of them and us," Wesley said. "How do you change that?"