

Juneteenth in Bethlehem

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing June 22, 2020

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

from Andrew Wagaman and Andrew Scott, “Juneteenth observers in Allentown, Bethlehem say recent uprising against structural racism is just the beginning.” Morning Call, June 20, 2020.

More than 100 demonstrators marched Friday through downtown Bethlehem to call for racial unity and an end to police violence, especially against people of color.

The multiracial group of people mostly in their 20s marched from Daniel Rice Plaza to Rose Garden Park, where the crowd heard speakers and live musical performances from various local bands.

The marchers carried signs reading “Black Lives Matter” and chanted slogans such as “No justice, no peace, no racist police.”

Some onlookers applauded while some passing motorists honked their horns in support, drawing cheers from the marchers.

In Bethlehem, Donovan Austin of Easton, one of the event’s organizers, told the crowd gathered at Rose Garden Park. “My ancestors were slaves in this country. My parents, grandparents and great-grandparents stood before the people, demanding to be treated equally. I am not ... a ‘thug.’ I’m a human being like anyone else.

“Those of us gathered here are of different colors, but right now we’re all one color and that color is love,” Austin said to cheers, raised fists and applause in the audience.

The idea for Bethlehem’s event was born weeks prior when Austin and several other friends, who are members of a local band, performed at a similar protest at the Bethlehem Public Library.

“People just started throwing money at us as we were performing and we ended up raising about \$770,” band member and event co-organizer Maxamilly Vazquez of Bethlehem said.

Band member and co-organizer Nailah Vazquez of Bethlehem said the money raised will be donated to local organizations.

“So, after that protest at the library, we decided to organize our own and have it on Juneteenth, which is a celebration of African-American culture and history. We wanted an event to promote peace, unity, good music and good vibes.”

The organizers invited friends via social media to participate in the rally.

“I heard about it through Instagram and thought it would be a really nice thing to be part of,” Anna Gehman of Bethlehem said. “Black people have a lot of reason to be upset. Police have too much power and use violence way too much, in my opinion. This protest is a good way to get the word out that things need to change.”

Carrying the red, black and green African American pride flag, Joel Paulson of Lower Saucon Township said, “Others have had their eyes opened to something that black people know has existed for a very long time. I really have a lot of hope that the energy we’re seeing among the participants here today continues going forward and that police officers who use unnecessary force will finally be held accountable.”

Participant Fabiana Gomez of Allentown said it’s important for people to be visibly active in bringing about an end to all forms of discrimination.

“If you’re not being seen taking action and calling your elected officials and taking other steps, then are you really doing your part?” Gomez asked. “It’s about time that we all started being treated equally. We’re all one race and that’s the human race.”

Some who watched the marchers pass through downtown voiced their approval.

“It’s great to see young people participating in a civil exercise, which is what we all should be doing,” said Bernardo Torres of Bethlehem,

enjoying a meal with his wife outside the Pho Bowl Vietnamese/Thai restaurant on Broad Street.

His wife, Louise Torres, said, “What they’re doing is protected by our Constitution. And it’s great to see they’re doing it peacefully.”