

Spartanburg leaders speak in support for peaceful protests in our community and nationwide

FRIDAY, JUNE 5

Speakers shared thoughts, presented a unified message of inclusion and equity



We hurt here and we hurt now. ... Be with us, be true allies, because we can't do it alone."

Spartanburg County Councilman Michael Brown

The mourning, acknowledgement, and conversation continued in the City of Spartanburg on Friday.

As people and communities nationwide continue to demonstrate and march against endemic police brutality following the strangulation of George Floyd — an unarmed and handcuffed black man — in a Minneapolis street, voices have been rising here in Spartanburg as well.

For the second time in four days, people gathered in the shadow of City Hall to listen to fellow citizens underscore the need for both speaking out and for listening, for both protesting and for peace, for both understanding and for change.

On Tuesday, more than a dozen local clergy members representing a number of denominations spoke. Days of peaceful protests and constructive dialogue followed here, even as images of police-protester clashes from across the nation filled people's screens and news feeds. Then came Thursday's comments from outside the City that alarmed and even frightened many people, threatening to stoke distrust between citizens and local law enforcement precisely when this moment calls for empathy and community-building.

So on Friday, a cross-section of 12 community members, each a leader in their own right and in their own way, stepped to the lectern to reiterate what the City of Spartanburg is today and what it is aspiring to be in the days to come. They included:

Assistant City Manager Mitch Kennedy, who grew up on the city's Northside and came back after earning a degree from Wake Forest to become a vital leader;
S.C. Rep. Rosalyn Henderson-Myers, who grew up on the city's Southside and who prior to being elected to the state legislature served in the same City Council seat her late father, Roy, once had;

Former Mayor Bill Barnet, who in his retirement has volunteered countless hours to helping empower Northside citizens to lead revitalization in that neighborhood;

Tim Burnett, the owner of the Phase 2 Barber Shop on the city's Southside and a mentor to dozens of young people over his more than three decades of work;

Betsy Teter, yet another Spartanburg native who poured her passion for writing and for her hometown into building the renowned Hub City Writers Group and Hub City Books;

Michael Brown, a local attorney who has served three terms on County Council and has long been one of Spartanburg's fiercest voices for racial justice;

Carey Rothschild, Spartanburg Regional Healthcare System's Director of Community Health Policy and Strategy, who helped build AccessHealth Spartanburg into one of the country's leading health equity organizations;

Wilma Moore, a Highland community leader and community advocate with the United Way of the Piedmont;

Geordy Johnson, CEO of The Johnson Group, which has been at the center of downtown's revitalization and growing economic opportunities for the past 20 years;

Landon Cohen, a Spartanburg High graduate and former NFL defensive lineman who has returned home and become a serial entrepreneur and job creator;

Junie White, the son of a Cherokee County sharecropper who became one of the community's most successful businessmen and has three times won the mayor's seat in a landslide.

And then there was Mathias Gentry, not even a week removed from walking across the stage to receive his diploma from Spartanburg High School. In a matter of weeks, he will take the sacred oath to defend the Constitution when he enrolls in the Army. He already has a keen understanding of what that document purports to guarantee.

"By a show of hands, who here bleeds the same color: red? I thought so," he said when the crowd in unison raised its hands. After thanking the city's police department for walking with protesters this week in partnership, he reminded people of their rights enshrined in the First Amendment:

"We as people should come together to speak out against racial discrimination and police brutality as one. ... Every voice, including my own, speaking for equality, justice and peace deserves to be heard

because enough is enough. So let's not be silent. Let's use our rights to speak up, stand up and rise above as one."

At the end, for eight minutes and 46 seconds, in total silence, the couple of hundred of Spartanburg citizens stood together in the middle of Spring Street in front of the mural that encourages people to "Love Where You Live." They did so at the request of Spartanburg Police Chief Alonzo Thompson, at the end of another morning of sadness, dialogue, peace, and, ultimately, unity.

The length of time was no accident: it was the same amount of time, to the second, that it took for a police officer, sworn to protect and serve, to choke the life out of George Floyd. While everyone did remain silent for the entire nearly nine minutes, few if any managed to remain still. Some shifted their weight from one leg to the other. Others changed the position of their hands or arms. Still others tried to steal a few glances at the rest of the crowd, or slowly rolled their heads from side to side.

Turns out that standing in place perfectly still, in silence, with a few hundred of your fellow citizens, friends and neighbors for eight minutes and 45 seconds is a hard, uncomfortable thing to do.

Now imagine what those eight minutes and 46 seconds were like for George Floyd.