

A THROG OF PEOPLE PACKED THE PENNSYLVANIA CAPITOL ROTUNDA IN HARRISBURG THIS SPRING TO CALL FOR CHANGES IN POLICE USE OF FORCE LAWS. HERE IS ONE ACCOUNT OF THE ISSUE AND THE MOMENT. BY KELCEY BAILEY



RALLY FOR CHANGE

“**N**

o justice, no peace. No racist police.”

I have heard these protest chants many times in the streets of Pittsburgh since June 2018. That’s when 17-year-old Antwon Rose II was shot and killed by then-police officer Michael Rosfeld, and I could not believe it: Is this my Pittsburgh? I joined in shouting these same words in March 2019—again with some disbelief—after hearing the news that Mr. Rosfeld had been acquitted. This time the outcries were louder. Those of us marching had seen that liberty and justice in Pittsburgh were not for all. If the law, as it is, accepts and protects the violent harm done by a police officer—a public servant—then it is time to change the law.

On April 30, 2019, several hundred people, mostly young adults and teens from the Pittsburgh region, took these chants with them to Harrisburg where they participated in a rally organized by the Alliance for Police Accountability (APA), a Pittsburgh-based social

justice group that was calling for changes in the police use of force laws in Pennsylvania. A friend had told me about the gathering and asked me to join APA in the capital. This was more than a protest, said my friend; this was a march for justice for my black brothers and sisters.

As a white social worker tired of watching the system fail minority groups, immigrants and people living in poverty, I shared the yearning for justice felt by my friend who is African American and a student at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, where I’m also enrolled. As part of my dual degree master’s program with the seminary and the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work, I had an internship in the spring with Casa San Jose, a local Latino resource center that advocates for and stands alongside the fights for justice for all minority groups. So, I crammed seven young activists from Casa San Jose and Pitt’s social work graduate program into a van and drove to the state capital for the APA rally.



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During an April rally at the Pennsylvania State Capitol Building in Harrisburg, Pittsburgh resident Christian Carter raised his fist as he chanted the name of Antwon Rose II, an unarmed black youth who was fatally shot last year by a police officer. Rally participants called for changes in the state laws concerning police use of force.

“WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON, MY PEOPLE? WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON?”

She eventually guided us inside the building. Filled with anticipation for what felt like a historical moment, we followed Rep. Lee’s aide through a security checkpoint and down several halls until we found ourselves in the Capitol rotunda, which was filled with a sea of purple shirts. Voices echoed throughout the massive chamber, which was ornately adorned with gold statues and quotes about justice engraved or painted on the walls.

Soon we joined others in the crowd around Rep. Lee and state Rep. Ed Gainey of Pittsburgh, a co-sponsor of the reform package. They, along with Antwon’s mother Michelle Kenney, his best friends, and other lawmakers, were scheduled to speak about the proposed law enforcement reforms. The legislative changes being sought not only included modifying definitions for the use of deadly force, but also called for additional measures such as appointing a special prosecutor to investigate any incident of deadly force involving a law enforcement officer and prohibiting the use of arbitration in matters of police discipline.

People filled the rotunda’s grand marble staircase and upper balcony, and tightly surrounded the podium where Rep. Lee used her powerful voice to declare the “fight for our freedom.” Rep. Gainey turned and thanked the rally participants from Pittsburgh, admiring their dedication and asserting, “We’re tired of asking for justice.”

Ms. Kenney added that “police should be held accountable like any other civil servant.” An African American youth who was one of Antwon’s best friends asked, “Why can they shoot me? I thought black lives matter.”

When a white state legislator, whose name I didn’t catch, came to the podium, he said he was disappointed that there weren’t more

white faces joining this fight. As one of the handful of white faces in the purple-clad crowd, I could relate.

At every break between speeches, our chants and singing overpowered the din of chatter and other lobbying around us. From the balcony, I joined in these interludes that included updated verses to songs by African American civil rights activists of the past:

“Antwon Rose was a freedom fighter
And he taught us how to fight.
We go’n’ fight all day and night
Until we get it right.
Which side are you on, my people?
Which side are you on?”

At the end of the rally, Rep. Lee dispersed the crowd, sending us to lobby state legislators. It had been jarring to stand in the beauty of the rotunda and petition for justice, after our songs had echoed in the streets of Pittsburgh for so many months. But it was important that we took our activism to the Capitol.

The comments from our representatives and the voices of the people gave me hope—hope that I was watching change in the making, justice in action. I felt an urgency for our system to be repaired, recalibrated, redesigned to protect peace, justice, life and worth for all, particularly when it comes to our police and our sons.

As our group meandered through the Capitol halls—actually trying to find a way out—we ran into Ms. Kenney. I did not know what to say, but she thanked and hugged us.

And I thought to myself that we’re going to keep singing and, as lyrics from the rally declared, keep fighting “until we get it right.” **h**

On that sunny April morning, we were among the stream of rally participants flowing into Harrisburg in buses, church vans and carpools from every corner of Pittsburgh. After parking near the front steps of the Capitol building, our small group walked around the Capitol square, where the building’s green dome glistened in the sunlight. Look for the purple—Antwon’s favorite color, which participants had been encouraged to wear—was my only strategy for finding the larger gathering.

Fortunately, we ran into a woman who works in the office of state Rep. Summer Lee of Swissvale Borough, a town east of Pittsburgh, who was one of the sponsors of a package of law enforcement reform proposals.

“Which way to the rally?” we asked.

“Which one?” she replied.

Duh, I realized. Of course there are other laws being lobbied for at the Capitol! Though that made sense, I still thought, this is the one that matters.