

Op-ed: How George Floyd-inspired protests inspired me

By **Aramis Hicks** - June 9, 2020



Protesters display signs calling for an end to police brutality on Saturday, May 30, in Salt Lake City. (Jared Stanger)

The United States of America, as I know it, has been set ablaze by the disgusting and preventable killing of George Floyd, an American citizen who died because a white police officer knelt on his neck.

I am a 24-year-old Black man who has led a somewhat sheltered life, but if you were to ask me "why did this happen?" my answer is simply, "it happened because he was Black!" Not dangerous, not violent, not deadly. He died because a white police officer did not see value in a Black man.

On Saturday, May 30, there were two scheduled protests in Utah to protest the death of George Floyd. The first was a [Salt Lake City protest](#) held by Utah Against Police Brutality. Participants were to carpool to the city, then ultimately march along to the front of the Salt Lake Police Station. The second protest, [held later that day in Ogden](#), was organized by Malik Dayo, a member of the Northern Utah Chapter of Black Lives Matter. This protest was a kneel-down at Ogden City Hall.

I was fortunate to attend both and had the unique opportunity to experience and compare them.

Salt Lake City protest

The Salt Lake City protest began at 11:30 a.m. My partner and I arrived a few minutes early with signs in hand and followed the crowds led by people with bull horns. We

proceeded past the public library to the front of the Salt Lake City Police Station, making sure our voices were heard.

A bit of concern entered my mind as tension increased, and it appeared that one of the group organizers had to reel the crowd in. The organizer was successfully able to position the crowd on the street opposite the police station. There were a lot of people and a few with bull horns leading various chants across the crowd. I honestly didn't know who was leading us. The crowd stayed peaceful and eventually we moved across the street to the entrance of the police.

The man who had reeled in the crowd lost control of the group when two men of color started to tag the police station. These two men took control of the group. You could feel their passion through their body language and then one of the young men was handed a bull horn, and he put action into his voice. His speech was not written or planned, he spoke with passion and anger. He demanded what happened to George Floyd should never be able to happen again and unnecessary death of innocent people in SLC be stopped immediately.

The crowd was poised for violence, and I knew in that moment these two men could have started a war against the police station. They had the power to turn the tense and passionate crowd violent. Yet, they refrained.

Yes, they had vandalized, but there had been no fighting, no arrows or baseball bats and no deaths.

As a Black man, I felt the rage, frustration, fear and sadness that all Black men feel at a time like this. I can honestly say I felt relief and pride in my community that things didn't turn ugly or violent. I was proud that even though we had reached a passionate boiling point, it didn't boil over. I felt pride in myself and everyone with me that we didn't let our anger rule our actions.

More from the SLC protest: [View photos](#) and [read additional reflections](#) from the May 30 demonstration.

Ogden protest

Around 12:30 p.m., my partner and I left Salt Lake City to go to our second protest rally. On the trip north to Ogden, I wondered what this rally would be like and what I would do if things went wrong, especially because two days prior, Officer Nate Lyday was tragically shot and killed in the line of duty. I was worried that if tensions in Ogden reached the level of Salt Lake City, the situation might become combustible.

When we arrived at City Hall, there were flags all over the lawn in remembrance of Officer Lyday. Even with this somber reminder, the mood of the participants was positive. The group organizers placed themselves on the steps of the city hall with an audio system. This was a well-organized event.

With kindness, water and masks were handed out to all in attendance. Dayo, who was one of the main event coordinators, was the host. He spoke kindly but passionately to the

crowd. He emphasized that troublemakers would not be tolerated and the importance of the protest being peaceful.

As the protest began, we knelt and continued to kneel in a prayerful position through the National Anthem. For one hour, we were inspired as each speaker expressed pain, sorrow and fears, not only for the death of George Floyd, but for the fact that Black people are seen as less for no other reason than the color of their skin.

More than pain, sorrow and suffering were shared at this protest; a feeling of community love and positivity was present.

There was a call to action to everyone present to participate in our communities. Over and over, speakers mentioned that if the number of people that had shown up to this protest attended city hall and Black Lives Matter meetings, there would be significant headway.

Speakers also discussed mobilizing the vote and getting involved, not simply by joining the movement, or riding the wave of it, but by speaking and making changes at the community level where we live our lives.

As the protest drew to a close, JaKai Kelly, the leader of the northern chapter of Black Lives Matter, called the Black men to the stage. I went up with a large group of other Black men and stood at the top of the City Hall steps. It was a moment and a movement I never thought I would be part of.

At the beginning of that Saturday afternoon, I had no idea what to expect, yet I had just experienced one of the most powerful moments of my 24 years of being on earth.



Black men protesting the death of George Floyd stand together on the steps of Ogden City Hall, at the request of protest organizers, on May 30 in Ogden, Utah. Floyd died in police custody on May 25 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. (Daisy Tovar)

Mixed emotions

After the Ogden protest, I had a lot to think about. I had never experienced a day like this. Honestly, I had very mixed emotions about what I was feeling.

Yes, I do qualify as a Black man to stand with the others, but I have done nothing extraordinary but live my life. In small ways, I have dealt with racism; ignoring what I thought was other people's ignorance or bigoted behavior, and just believing if the other person knew me, their opinion would change.

I did not realize that small injustices can lead to intolerable situations; little things, like an officer stopping me for no reason, or a woman in our neighborhood thinking I was a long way from home when my home was just around the corner, or a teacher who told me that the way I dressed indicated that I must be failing my classes. I overlooked all of this because I have always stood on the love and morals my parents taught me.

Including that, I am much more than my skin color and just like every other person walking on this planet. But in overlooking the feelings and prejudices of others, I have been contributing to the problem of racism in the United States of America. I have been ignoring my civic duty, not just as a Black man, but as an American citizen.

It is all our duties to hold our local government and people in power accountable for every human's basic rights. This can be done by voting and encouraging others to vote — not just in the presidential elections, but in all elections as to have a voice in what is happening at all the government levels.

The Ogden protest gave me so much more than just a venue to vent my anger and frustration over the unnecessary death of George Floyd. It gave me a call to action to vote, challenge prejudices and bigotry, and to improve my community relationships with all people, no matter their ethnicity, or their religion. It gave me hope to make the future better and made me understand that each of us must be a part of improving life.

I pray that other people in the Salt Lake Valley will help to positively change what has been happening and be ready to do their part, and can also be as fortunate as I was to face the reality of what is and change it to what is correct.

Dismayed by destruction

As we left Ogden with this wonderful uplifted spirit filled with future positive outcomes, I took to Twitter. Reality hit when I saw Salt Lake City trending.

I saw people starting a fire at the entrance to the downtown library. An SLC police car was flipped over and set on fire. I watched a man with a bow and arrow fire into a crowd of not just protesters, but fellow Salt Lake City residents. Other's stealing and looting at City Creek Mall. I was just devastated.

All the positive, proactive feelings replaced by visuals of devastation. I know how social media works; all the good, positive things that happened will be pushed aside and forgotten. The Ogden protest will be a silent memory while all the sensational violence will be exploited.

I do not question the Salt Lake protesters who wanted to do the right thing. I thank all those people who stepped up to do the right thing in a peaceful, nonviolent and nondestructive way to make a difference.

I do question those who just want a selfie for holding a sign, or those looking to use a peaceful protest to take the opportunity to steal, loot and destroy. Why, I ask? Not just as a Black man, but as a hypocrite myself, to this movement. Why have you perverted this nationwide cry for help for your own benefit and a reason to destroy what others have built, the place we live?

Instead, I beg you to put your energy into organizing real change in the culture of American intolerance and especially at your local level. For me, that will be here in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Create positive change

To the organizers of Utah Against Police Brutality, I urge you to speak with the organizers of Black Lives Matter Utah to discuss a better or different way to handle your protests or rallies for more positive results. I experienced firsthand both rallies as a participant and the proactive, positive approach was more effective.

I urge all who read this, most importantly those at Salt Lake Community College, to get involved in your communities.

I understand the feeling of powerlessness you may feel about voting, but change starts small, at the lowest level or form of government. If we want to experience change, we, the people, must demand it and contribute to it! Not just by the actions of one day, but by our voices and our vote, so change will happen in our lifetime.

It is up to us, by our actions, to stop this craziness.

If we join the silent majority, how many George Floyds will die? Will one of them be you or me? How can we live with ourselves knowing there's something we are able to do about it? How responsible are we being if we are silent for the death of George Floyd and other unnecessary deaths across this land of freedom?

That haunts me.

That is why it is time for people like you and me to step up and do what is right. Thinking about ending violence and police reform is not enough. We must act now. Use your voice, get involved in the conversation of your community and vote.