

Across America, silent vigils in Michael Brown's memory

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(RNS) In cities large and small, people across America came together to silently remember Michael Brown, a teen none knew in life but whose death August 9 sparked a wave of unrest in his Missouri hometown and raised questions about racial profiling and police militarization.

Attendees wore red ribbons to honor Brown, 18, at Thursday (August 14) evening rallies from Maine to Michigan, Florida to New York, Vermont, Colorado, and California.

Many shared their stories of alleged police brutality, and called for a new compact between officers and civilians.

Brown, who was black, was shot dead by a police officer in the St. Louis suburb of Ferguson. While local police have released few details about the circumstances of Brown's death, his body lay in the street for hours. His death has drawn increasing national attention, first from civil unrest by furious residents, and then an increasingly heavy-handed police presence fueled by heavy social media attention.

Kenny Wiley, a youth minister who helped organize a vigil in Denver said Brown's death is the most recent demonstration of what he called the "systemic inequality" facing young black men in America. Wiley, who is black, said the system feels stacked against some people who pay the price with their lives.

"It wasn't in our city, but this is our country, our world," said Wiley, 26. "We want to stand up and say enough is enough, and to mourn those who have lost their lives." Wiley led about 100 people through a vigil that included the out-loud listing of names of black men killed by police and chants of "hands up, don't shoot."

In Greenville, South Carolina, about 200 people, including Jesse Jackson, gathered on a plaza in front of the Peace Center for the Performing Arts.

“This struggle has depth and breadth and history,” Jackson, a Greenville native, told the crowd. “And if the impact of his death wakes you up, he’s made a contribution.”

Jackson recalled as a child the lynching of a black mentally retarded man in 1947 in nearby Pickens County and called the shooting death of Michael Brown “a state execution.”

“If it’s done by an official with a badge on and a gun, it is a state execution,” he said.

Jackson said he was in town to visit his mother when he heard about the rally, organized by two young black men.

“This is a wake-up call,” he said. “I find a certain fascination with watching these young men and women be born again.

“This is the day of your birth,” he told Ricky Pulley, one of the organizers. “You were just now born again.”

Eric Wood, a white 51-year-old business owner from Greenville, held up a sign that said “Remember!” and “Protect & Serve. No one is above the law.”

“I’m a law-and-order guy,” he said. “I believe in the police, but there are bad cops.”

Ryan Thomas, a 31-year-old auto technician from Greenville, said he felt that if he didn’t take a stand here, far from Ferguson, that something like what happened to Brown could happen in Greenville.

“It’s a problem everywhere,” he said. “It’s not just one city, one state.”

At Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, Joann Mitchell, a 53-year-old mother of a young boy, was on the verge of tears imploring the crowd to do more than get angry.

“All this here,” she said, gesturing to poster boards with the faces of some police shooting victims, “is because we didn’t do nothing. You’ve got to stop. You’ve got to hold on to each other.”

She went on, "Vote. Stop letting them do it to us. Go to school, get your education and stop this, because no one else can stop it."

In Indianapolis, Tiffany Pettiford brought her 8-year-old son, Joseph Duerson, to a rally in downtown's Monument Circle that drew about 100 people. As the mother of a young black boy, Pettiford said, she lives with worry for her son.

"He could just be walking down the street in 10 years, minding his own business, matching the description of someone who did do something wrong, and all of a sudden it's 'Stop! Put your hands in the air!'," she said. "And with his autism, he might get scared and run."

In Burlington, Vt., Davaki Chayut said she felt "pretty frustrated and hopeless" over the militarization of police forces.

"I think it's important as a community to speak for those who are not being heard, to speak for those who are persecuted, and it's so complicated," Chayut said.

The vigil in Phoenix took place on a sultry evening at Eastlake Park, a longtime hub for civil rights rallies and African-American events. There was no visible police presence. Names of alleged brutality victims were recited aloud, followed by a moment of silence.

"What's it really mean to have justice?" asked Tia Oso, a co-organizer. "What's it really mean to have justice? That's why we're here today."

Also contributing: Dennis Wagner of The Arizona Republic; Ron Barnett, The Greenville (S.C.) News, Dustin Racioppi, Asbury Park (N.J.) Press, Elizabeth Murray of the Burlington (Vt.) Free Press, Diana Penner of the Indianapolis Star.