

Activist who took down Confederate flag from statehouse drew on faith, civil rights awakening

by [Jesse James DeConto](#) in the [August 19, 2015](#) issue

As she prepared for her mission—scaling the 30-foot flagpole outside the South Carolina statehouse to bring down the Confederate flag—Bree Newsome reread the biblical story of David and Goliath.

Newsome, 30, a youth organizer with Ignite NC, a nonprofit group challenging restrictive voting laws, spoke in mid-July in Hot Springs, North Carolina, at the Wild Goose Festival, the four-day camp revival that celebrates spirituality, arts, and justice.

“I don’t even feel like it was my human strength in that moment,” Newsome said. “I’m honestly just so humbled.”

Newsome climbed the flagpole June 27 to remove the Confederate battle flag, a symbol that represents for many a war to uphold slavery and, later, opposition to civil rights for blacks.

Her action came ten days after the mass shooting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in downtown Charleston, South Carolina, in which nine participants in a Bible study, including the pastor, were killed.

She was charged with defacing a monument, a misdemeanor, according to a statement from the South Carolina Department of Public Safety, and could face a fine of up to \$5,000 and up to three years in prison.

On July 10, the Confederate flag was lowered for good after state legislators signed a bill authorizing its removal.

“Why did people have to die for people to realize the state had been promoting hate with this symbol?” Newsome asked.

Newsome grew up hearing her grandmother’s story of a black neighbor brutally beaten by Ku Klux Klan members because he was a doctor who treated a white woman. She told of ancestors who came through Charleston’s slave market and

others who died in lynchings.

Invited to speak to the mostly white audience long after the festival schedule was set, Newsome joined a roster of speakers on the theme of “Blessed Are the Peacemakers.” This year’s gathering honored the festival’s “fairy godmother” Phyllis Tickle, the Christian author diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer. Other speakers included Ferguson Commission member Traci Blackmon, Moral Monday founder William Barber II, and immigrant advocate Alexia Salvatierra.

“We were in the presence of history,” poet Merrill Farnsworth said of Newsome’s appearance. “I was really glad to catch a glimpse of the person who did this.”

Newsome, who is the daughter of a Baptist minister and former president of Shaw University in Raleigh, said she felt called to a new civil rights campaign following the death of Florida teen Trayvon Martin, a killing she likened to the death of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old boy mutilated in 1955 after allegedly flirting with a white woman.

After the police killing of Michael Brown in Missouri last year, Newsome helped to convene The Tribe, a collective dedicated to community building. Her actions at the South Carolina statehouse grew out of what she calls her “crisis of faith” following the Emanuel shootings.

“This is like 9/11 to me,” Newsome said. “I see people just going about their daily lives. I can’t do that.”

On one hand, she said, the victims’ families’ forgiveness of accused killer Dylann Roof was a “rare display of Christ-like behavior.” On the other hand, she said, a too easy forgiveness has at times helped perpetuate racist systems.

Activists from Charlotte, North Carolina, had already been planning to remove the flag and had taken photos of the pole in preparation when they asked Newsome to participate. They talked about the symbolic power of having a black woman remove the flag.

“Hollywood’s created plenty of white heroes,” said activist James Ian Tyson, who appeared with Newsome. He had knelt on the ground so she could climb onto his back and over the four-foot fence surrounding the flagpole.

Newsome said it wasn’t an easy decision to climb the pole. She was afraid for her life and kept repeating the 27th Psalm as she descended the pole: “The Lord is my light

and my salvation; whom shall I fear?"

She recounted an argument with a police officer who ordered her down. The officer told her, "You're doing the wrong thing," she said.

At that moment she remembered her reading of David and Goliath.

"If we really want to work for a peaceful society, we have to agitate," she said. "Until the people in power have to deal with you, they won't."

Newsome said she hopes for a day when black people won't have to face obstacles to voting, endure underfunded schools, or fear losing their lives at the hands of police.

At an interview after her talk, Newsome met Blackmon, a United Church of Christ pastor helping people in Ferguson respond to the Brown shooting. The pair embraced, and Blackmon thanked the young activist.

"You lit my fire," Blackmon said.

"Y'all lit my fire in Ferguson," Newsome said. "God is a God of liberation. . . . I know that he heard my great-great-grandmother in South Carolina when she was praying for her children to be free, and we're going to keep praying until we're all free."

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