

Voices Demand to be Heard

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It is August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2014. I have been home from South Africa for one week and have just moved to a new city, where I will shortly embark on a new journey in my life. Little did I know, one week after this move, the city that was my new home would spew issues so deep and complex that the only option was to *fight back*. I was an outsider to St. Louis; an outsider to the experiences of African American people in this country; an outsider to police brutality, racism, and inequality. But none of these were outside of my heart, my values, or my desire to engage with in the fight that was ensuing.

During my trip to South Africa, I learned a significant amount in regards to the black and white struggle that has existed throughout the country. Although gains have been made since the era of the Apartheid, the stark contrast and disparities between black and white individuals is very apparent and still a major concern for the country. The reflections and realizations that I had while visiting this amazing country only fueled my passion and frustration over race-related inequalities. I returned to America with a renewed and rejuvenated spirit towards my journey of creating social justice.

That same spirit nearly exploded on August 10<sup>th</sup> – the day I first learned of the shooting death of Michael Brown. I was informed of what happened by my boyfriend, Derrick, a lifelong resident of St. Louis. I was distraught by the news; in the first week of my new home, a severe tragedy had already occurred. We had taken a small trip that day to visit my family, and as we were driving back into St. Louis, we were listening to the radio and began hearing about all of the protesting, negative police reactions, and pure tragedy that was occurring in Ferguson. It was frightening to not understand exactly what was going on and to be unsure of what we would wake up to the next morning. As the realization that protests would be continuous set in, and as I

became more and more invested, I started wondering how I would be able to fight for the same issues that the community of Ferguson and of Greater St. Louis were fighting for. But the feeling of being an outsider, left me paralyzed.

As I contemplated what I had learned during my trip to South Africa, and now seeing such pure racist antics in my own country, I began wondering how different the reality in America was from the experiences of black and brown people in South Africa. And if this reality really is not so different, I contemplated what that meant for this country. Quite honestly, I was broken hearted to be making this comparison.

Coupled with feeling like an outsider, I also struggled understanding what effective and meaningful ways I could be involved in the movement. Because the protests were resulting in violence from the police so often in the beginning, I was hesitant to attend the protests. I tried to sign up for various volunteer initiatives, but nothing ever seemed to come together. I did not know where to start. I settled with becoming knowledgeable about why this tragedy was happening in my new home. I talked to individuals I knew from St. Louis about their perspective, read historical documents, and caught up on current news. The more insight I gained, the more I understood that what was happening was an explosion of built up unrest throughout the history and present of St. Louis.

With my deeper understanding of the community and the issues present within the community, I felt it was time to try attending a protest and determine how that type of action felt for me. I desired to discover if this kind of civil action was a beneficial action for myself, and for the fight as a whole. I wanted to know if this method of civil action and outcry against the issues at large would create necessary, but also enduring change. To begin my assessment, on August 30<sup>th</sup>, 2014, I attended a protest in which I marched from the Canfield Green Apartments

to the Ferguson Police Station. There were hundreds of people present, making for an incredible sight and a marvelous atmosphere. We made a statement. We cried out for what we wanted and what we thought was right. We showed our conviction and our passion for anyone to see. I felt so empowered, so uplifted, so inspired to push on or this social justice fight, despite any obstacles that might be in the way. And most importantly, we were seen and we were heard.

I found the answer to my question. From this point forward, I knew that civil action, lobbying, campaigning, or any other political advocacy were all effective within this movement; each have their own role and part to play. If the civil action never began, where would the political agenda even stand? Unnoticed as previously, I would imagine. The civil action started the political movement, from my perspective. And currently, the voices around St. Louis speak to that with the mention that anything can be done or pushed through the legislature at this point. To be within this protest was like nothing else I have ever experienced. I cried, I laughed, and more importantly I felt the passion within each and every person present that day. And no one can deny that. After my attendance at this protest, I understood the value that it holds.

Since this protest, I have continued attending others. Some have been large demonstrations like the one on August 30<sup>th</sup>, and some have been much smaller. I have attended one protest that was not in Ferguson and I noticed a significant difference during that protest. In Ferguson, the protestors take over the streets. And typically, individuals who are trying to drive on those streets will honk in solidarity, give the protestors respect, and allow some room for patience with us. However, I attended a protest downtown the day after the announcement of the grand jury's decision was released. The atmosphere was different. It felt much more confrontational. As we blocked the interstate, cars were honking in agitation and yelling rude and inconsiderate obscenities at us. Also, the confrontation with the police was at a much greater

level and intensity. I witnessed police in riot gear, screaming at protestors and pepper spraying them for what appeared to be no reason at all. It was a frightening sight, and I felt scared of the individuals who are supposed to protect and serve me.

To further emphasize why I believe this kind of civil action is an important part of the movement and why I think it is effective in the fight, I want to expand on the agitation of the drivers on the day that I attended the protest downtown. To be fair, I understand that many people on the interstate that day may have been running late for an important event, or trying to get to work on time, or may have had a bad day already and this inconvenience was an added frustration to their day. But my frustration with them became overwhelming. The few minutes that we were blocking the highway does not even begin to compare to what minorities in the country have to experience each and every day. Let alone, the fact that young black men are losing their lives and their friends and families are left to grieve for them. For me, it only put into perspective how much this issue must become relevant to all, and not an inconvenience. And although I felt somewhat disempowered during this protest, each night on the news I saw thousands of people across the country and across the globe standing up to join the fight, and that is all I really needed to see to understand how powerful and important civil action is. If it gives me a renewed spirit, then I can imagine that it renews the spirit of many others in this fight. And that spirit is taken to the political landscape, where hopefully real and enduring changes can begin to happen.

I often am still unsure of where I fit in within this movement. I am always wanting to find ways to get involved, but I do not know how or where to put my energy. I want to keep participating in civil action, but I also feel compelled to join in other activities, such as lobbying or volunteering to support other initiatives, or even creating my own initiatives. However, I still

struggle with my identity within this movement. I still feel like an outsider in this city, in the experiences of those fighting, because of the color of my skin, and the experiences which I have never had to experience. This internal battle oftentimes keeps me from doing more. However, I have put myself into new situations and tried to determine what the best methods for me in this fight are. I have tried to understand what activities will help move this fight along. And I feel I have found some answers. We must fight in whatever way feels right for us. And we must not condemn the activities of those who are attempting to find their way within the fight. Some might argue that civil action is more of a nuisance than anything else. But in my experience, it has been such a powerful outcry of passion; and it has gained the attention of important political figures, especially locally. The voices of the protestors created the initial push for change. They alone have turned Michael Brown's death into a fight for social justice. They are the voices for all those who have been lost to police brutality. They seek answers, they seek solutions. They show the world what democracy looks like. They show the world that racist police will not be tolerated. They show the world that black lives matter.