

TOP STORY

## ‘This is just the beginning’

Peaceful protesters demonstrate outside SW Police Department

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Mackenzie Mason, 8, leads protesters in chants at Nevers Road Park across the street from the police station, Tuesday, June 2, 2020, in South Windsor.  
Jim Michaud / Journal Inquirer

**SOUTH WINDSOR — Mackenzie Mason’s 8-year old voice crackled through a megaphone on Tuesday afternoon as protesters lined the curb of Nevers Park, facing the Police Department across the street.**

**“No justice. No peace,” Mason yelled over the whoosh of oncoming Sand Hill Road traffic, as protesters followed her in chorus with signs raised.** Throughout the day, some passing motorists shouted back at the protesters in opposition, but many other drivers honked their horns and raised their fists in unity with them.

It’s 4:45 p.m. and many of the demonstrators were young adults or high school-age teens, following suit with the thousands of Black Lives Matter protests seen this last week across the country, calling for the end of police brutality and systemic racism. The demonstrations, which have been mostly peaceful during the day but at times descended into violence and looting at night in some cities, are in response to the murder of George Floyd at the hands of the Minneapolis Police Department officers who handcuffed him and knelt on his neck and back for eight minutes and 46 seconds, cutting off his air supply. For the last two minutes and 53 seconds, Floyd, who had been begging officers to let him breath, was “non-responsive,” according to two autopsy reports.

“This wasn’t a training failure this was depraved indifference to human life,” South Windsor Police Chief Scott Custer said Monday. “We share that solidarity with the folks who are here today.

“It points to the needs for police agencies to hear,” the calls to end systemic racism “and delve into it and listen and have these conversations,” Custer added. “This is about listening and being responsive to the community.”

South Windsor resident Randy Colton, who organized the daylong protest, said he plans to schedule future demonstrations, possibly every other week. He added that people need to start advocating that “Black Lives Matter, always,” and that must become normalized.

“We can’t let this die, this time,” Colton said regarding the movement started years ago, adding that people of color should not have to live in fear.

As vehicles passed by, the demonstrators raised their hands in either a fist or a peace sign. Posters alongside them and held in the air, read: “Justice for George.” “Silence Is Violence.” “Black Lives Matter.”

After hours of screaming chants for justice, Mackenzie Mason turned and said to the crowd: “OK, we can take a break.”

“Yes, coach,” Jeremiah Taylor responded to his younger sister as he shared a fist bump with her. Taylor and Mason, along with their mother, Nicole Taylor, all from South Windsor, had been at it for about four hours. The demonstration started at 10 a.m. with the plan to end at sunset.

“She’s been leading the whole thing,” Jeremiah said proudly of Mackenzie. “My mom, she’s done her time. It’s our time now,” the teen added.

“Silence is way louder,” Taylor said about police brutality. “If you’re not speaking up, you’re saying it’s acceptable.”

Taylor said he has “the utmost respect for police,” however he and his friend, Ryan Gurry said they hope there can be more police training and better de-escalation practices in the future.

“I worry about us,” Taylor said of himself and his sister, adding that as a black man who sometimes jogs for exercise in his neighborhood, he had a series of nightmares after the recent murder of Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia.

Taylor said that in his few encounters with police in town, he and his family have felt safe, overall. But at the same time, his mother taught him to never resist a police officer, and to always keep his hands visible, Taylor said.

Around 5:30 p.m., Custer and Deputy Chief Kristian Lindstrom left the police station and stood near the protesters to be available to talk.

Sgt. Mark Cleverdon on Tuesday morning said the police department would be interested in holding a community meeting in the future to address how the department and police across the state operate, as well as answer any questions or concerns the public might have about the profession. He added that although the department would be comfortable having the discussion, hosting the meeting would have to wait until social distancing guidelines due to the novel coronavirus are eased.

Taylor and Gurry agreed that a community conversation among residents and police would be impactful, and could lead to change in how police are trained.

Both Custer and Lindstrom acknowledged that it is important for the community to be heard, adding that they understand the ongoing protests throughout the country are happening because for too often, police officers and supervisors have allowed abuse to go unchecked.

“Hopefully this is the beginning of an ongoing, established and sustained conversation” between the police department and the public.

“We need to listen,” Lindstrom added.

Custer added that “this is just the beginning — this isn’t going to end this week or this month.”

A march in solidarity is scheduled for Thursday from 5 to 7 p.m., gathering at the soccer fields at Nevers Park and marching to the police station and then Town Hall. Protesters are asked to wear a mask and bring their own signs.