

Update Posted to Facebook 11/28/16:

The White Birminghamians for Black Lives witnesses have two main purposes:

- to be an avenue of dissent — a way to say “not in my name” — for white persons long aware and deeply concerned about the many forms of discrimination and violence against persons and communities of color, and about how this discrimination and violence affects not only communities of color but white people and white families as well, economically as well as spiritually.
- to be an open space of invitation for whites who are coming to this awareness, or who have been aware but have not stepped out before, to come and join the activity, and from there learn of other opportunities to voice and live out their concern.

One reason we hold the witnesses at Kelly Ingram Park, where there are sculptures depicting many of the historic occasions of Birmingham’s Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s, is to help white Birminghamians continue to process what that history means to us. I find that many of us struggle with the history of our city and don’t know how to situate ourselves in regard to it. The witnesses help us realize that that history is our history too. It was a major factor in how we grew up, in our own family histories, in the moral choices that we have made and are making in our lives. There is great peace of mind for white Birminghamians in admitting to ourselves and others that we are awed and humbled by the amazing Movement that happened here, that we are grateful for and supportive of the advances in human rights that the Movement brought about, and that we are getting into the as-yet-unfinished Movement with both feet. That is the purpose of the witnesses.

We very much need and welcome the participation of people of color in these actions. The presence, participation and support of persons of color is vital and critical to the spirit and effectiveness of the witnesses. White Birminghamians for Black Lives is for everyone who thinks it’s a good idea for white people to stand up for racial equality!

We use the format of a “walking witness” in order to symbolize the invitation to others to join us on the journey to justice. People sometimes have an oppositional reaction to seeing people standing and holding signs, thinking they are being confronted about something. So we walk. Everything we do is done to demonstrate a spirit of welcome and invitation. I keep thinking of myself fifty years ago, wondering as a teenager what would happen if I showed up at a Movement event. We call the witnesses “White Birminghamians for Black Lives” so there can be no doubt whatever that whites who come are expected, and will find a warm and safe welcome.

If we’re unable to do the walking, as I am sometimes unable to do, we generally sit, stand, or walk slowly near the middle of the park carrying our sign. This has the effect of inviting people into conversation.

We have many conversations with people during the course of most of the witnesses. It’s not uncommon for someone to stop their car, get out and come over, talk with us about their own history and who they are, what we’re doing and why, and take photos with us. In the park itself, we meet many Birminghamians as well as many visitors to the park from out of state.

Dewayne Wesley, cousin of Cynthia Wesley, one of the little girls killed in the 1963 Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing, stopped his car and came over to talk with us last Friday. He told us stories of growing up in Birmingham that did not make us proud, but that we needed to hear. Many hugs were shared.

The object of the witnesses is not these meaningful exchanges, though I imagine that each participant remembers and treasures them. The object is to give evidence of our support for the freedom, equality and dignity of people of color, and of our demand that the ideals of this nation be brought to full realization. It is also to let us all be strengthened by the communion we share with one another — black, white, and brown, LGBTQ, cisgender and straight, young and old, religious and secular, able-bodied and differently abled — as we conduct these witnesses. A feeling of unity and uplift is very much an unforgettable part of these experiences.

This is not a time to be silent. This is a time to find new voice and fresh energy as we move into a period in our nation’s history that brings with it so many unknowns; a time to maintain our commitment to equality, to fairness, to justice, and to love.

We invite YOU to join us. We also urge you to bring others who are veterans to these issues and especially others who are new. If you know someone you think would appreciate a way to give concrete expression to their commitment to equality and justice for all, urge them to come. Let's begin this new chapter of our lives together.

We meet every Friday at Kelly Ingram Park. During this season, the witnesses take place from 11:00 AM to 1:00 PM. Please come for part or all.

11/28/16