

For Immediate Release: 7/29/2020

Winston-Salem Demonstrators On Concerns Regarding #OccupyWSNC

From the beginning of our efforts demanding justice for Mr. Neville, we have respected the family's wishes to not have the video of the circumstances leading to their father's death be made public. We stand by that decision as organizers and individuals. We understand the trauma associated with Mr. Neville's family having to publicly relive their grief, and also know the trauma associated with Black people being consistently exposed to brutality against people that look like us. Now that the family has decided to support efforts to release the video, we support their agency in making that difficult decision. We cannot imagine how unbearable this journey has been for them, and we are in awe of their bravery and strength. We continue to stand with them, and will continue to stand in the gap for them demanding justice for their father and policy change that is in accordance with their goals to prevent what happened to Mr. Neville from happening to anyone else.

We have found it necessary to respond to some questions and concerns regarding #OccupyWSNC. It has come to our attention that community members and local organizations have a number of criticisms of our efforts on the ground demanding transparency and justice for Mr. John Elliott Neville.

First, several community members and organizations have implied that members of Triad Abolition Project and Unity Coalition, and occupiers on the ground are engaging in this action for our own interests. It is important for us to clarify that since July 9th when we held our first action in response to the WSPD arrests on July 8th, our intention has been to push for relevant policy change to make certain that what happened to Mr. Neville never happens to anyone else's loved ones. We gain nothing from these efforts personally other than knowing that our community will be a safer place for all of us. Any fundraising that has occurred has utilized grassroots methods of financial transparency with our first public accounting being released on August 1st. In fact, many of us have used our personal finances to support this movement. Any media coverage has been to amplify our demands and efforts to effect policy change. To be clear, there are many things that all of us could do for personal gain that would be much more accessible than spending 12 hours per day in extreme heat, lightning storms, swarms of bugs, and agitators. We have spent time away from our families, friends, careers, and homes in service of the movement. Mr. Neville's loved ones have joined us at our occupation and they have expressed their appreciation and support of our efforts on several occasions.

Second, several community members have critiqued our use of civil disobedience tactics, specifically organized arrests. In 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail, "Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored." Dr. King lived by these words, being arrested nearly 30 times for acts of civil disobedience. The need for civil disobedience in Winston-Salem was a direct result of WSPD Chief Catrina Thompson's broken promise to protect peaceful protests. In 2020, we stand in the street in an act of civil disobedience, an act of nonviolent direct action, because our brothers, sisters, and siblings are being murdered, mistreated, abused, and neglected in the county jail here in Winston-Salem and in many places across the country. These arrests are not a "show" as we understand the significance of demonstrators' decisions to willingly put their lives and livelihoods on the line for

justice. We do, however, know the efficacy of civil disobedience, especially given the history of these types of actions in our city with the Winston-Salem sit-in demonstrations in 1960.

These criticisms have also included commentary regarding the use of Forsyth County Community Bail Fund resources. We are currently, and have been throughout this entire occupation, working directly with this organization who stands fully in support of our efforts. We have directly communicated with them regarding their financial standing and whether our efforts are draining their funds. We have been assured that their organization is completely funded and not in need of donations. They have assured us that the arrests which we coordinate are not negatively impacting their ability to maintain their mission. If and when that changes we have already been in discussions with this organization about hosting fundraising efforts. We urge you to contact them directly with any concerns you have about their financial vitality.

Third, there has been some concern regarding partnerships between the organizations leading #OccupyWSNC and other local justice-oriented organizations. To be clear, we have extended open, public, and private invitations to every organization of which we are aware in Winston-Salem. Many organizations (including Hate Out of Winston, OMNIBUS, Prisoner Outreach Initiative, Forsyth Court Support, Winston 4 Peace, United States of Racism, Triad Restorative Justice, SHARE Co-Op, Democratic Socialists of America-Winston-Salem, ACLU of North Carolina, Vote On Purpose, Poetic Lee, Ashley Johnson Photography, Steady Hype, Nia Sadler (Dance), The Alexander Network, NC Statewide Police Accountability Network, and the National Birth Equity Collaborative) have joined us at Bailey Park, shared their messages, and worked with us to develop strategies about how we might be able to amplify their efforts. We have sent emails on behalf of local organizations, attended other organizations' events, and occupiers have directly joined the efforts of many of these organizations. For example, a number of occupiers now work as Court Watchers with Housing Justice Now, and we have sent dozens of emails in support of the efforts of Hate Out of Winston and OMNIBUS. If you would like to come speak at the occupation about your justice-oriented work, please reach out to us directly. We'd love to have you.

Fourth, our decision to begin and sustain an occupation was not uninformed, unresearched, or unplanned. We have been able to sustain this occupation into its third week because of the diligent planning of the organizers, the dedication of the occupiers, and the generosity and support of our community near and far. We decided to use this tactic because we felt it was our best option to engender significant policy change.

We hope this statement clarifies any concerns that community members may have. If you have any additional questions or concerns, please reach out directly to us at triadabolitionproject@gmail.com.