

https://www.newjerseyhills.com/bernardsville_news/news/videos-hundreds-brave-heat-to-march-for-justice-in-bernardsville/article_3209bbaa-a072-597a-a9ed-f03de797fe95.html

TOP STORY

(VIDEOS) Hundreds brave heat to march for justice in Bernardsville

Peaceful crowd joins national protest movement

By CHARLIE ZAVALICK Editor

Jun 6, 2020



More than 1,000 marchers take to Route 202 in downtown Bernardsville on Saturday, June 6 protesting the killing of A Minnesota police.

Photo by P.C. Robinson

BERNARDSVILLE – Millicent Fenwick would have been proud.

A huge crowd possibly exceeding 1,000 residents marched against racial injustice on a sweltering day in the downtown area on Saturday, far exceeding organizers' expectations.

Carrying protest signs and chanting “Black Lives Matter,” local families demonstrated solidarity with others throughout the nation protesting the killing of African American George Floyd at the hands of police in Minnesota.

The event was promoted on social media as as a peaceful march – and it fit that advance billing, as there were no visible signs of violence or property damage throughout the two-hour long event.

Marchers began assembling in the parking lot of Bernards High School at about 9:30 a.m. for speeches by organizers Gina Beltz of Bernardsville and Olivia Almada of Basking Ridge.

Also addressing the crowd were incoming Bernards High senior Rai Bindra, who offered an emotional speech for justice that concluded with quotes from Michael Jackson’s hit song “We are the world,” and Pastor Fenco of Camino de Fe Church in Bernardsville who called for peace and unity.

After the speeches, a group of students from the Bernards High Madrigals performed a moving rendition of “Danny Boy” in recognition of personal loss. That was immediately followed by a group sing-along of the Bill Withers’ classic, “Lean On Me.”

The crowd then proceeded in waves along Olcott Avenue, down Anderson Hill Road and onto Olcott Square and Route 202 which was temporarily blocked off from traffic.

The marchers then headed west toward the train station parking lot, where a memorial of flowers, signs and pictures was created at the base of the statue of Millicent Fenwick, the beloved late Congresswoman from Bernardsville who was known for her integrity and fairness.

The event took place during the pandemic, and virtually everyone participating wore protective masks, as required by organizers.

At one point during the speeches, a teen-age girl apparently fainted, presumably due to the heat. She was tended to and was eventually able to walk with assistance to an ambulance that was called to the scene.

‘Racism Is Real’

Prior to the march, the speakers addressed the issue of racism in the nation, and locally.

"As a mother I cannot imagine what it must be like for a black mother struggling to keep her family safe in a pandemic while also worrying about murder and abuse from the police," Beltz said. "While we're all human, systematic racism and oppression of black people is very real."

"Not being racist is not enough," she added, saying residents need to be anti racist and support black initiatives and platforms.

Almada noted that her parents were among the first Paraguayan families to come to Bernardsville in the 1980s.

To this day, she said she still hears "we don't belong here."

"Racism is real," she said. "It is still happening and it's happening here in this town."

"Of course I'm going to stand up for my black brothers and sisters," she said. "Your fight is my fight."

Bernards High School student Bindra, "a proud Sikh American," told the crowd of his experiences as a minority in the school.

He noted that he has felt out of place – "like a fish on land" – as someone "with dark skin living in the rich white suburbs of New Jersey."

"But the one thing I did bring to Bernards High School is culture and a symbol to all minorities that you are not alone," he said.

He told the crowd that they "all have a voice" and invited all to be open with him and others.

"I hope respect will triumph over insult," he said. "I hope compassion for one another will triumph over cruelty. And I hope progress will triumph adversity. I hope justice will triumph injustice. And I hope humanity will triumph evil."

Several participants in the crowd also addressed the issues of racism and inequality when interviewed by this newspaper.

Among them were Peapack-Gladstone residents Valerie Pawloski and Jackie Braun.

"I'm here to support racial justice. We have to voice our outrage," Pawloski said. "We cannot be silent. Every single one of us. We want to make a difference and not just in major cities, but to show our support in every town. Everyone should step up."

"I'm here today because my fiance is African American and I do worry," Braun said. "I worry when he goes to work, he works in New York. We come from a small town, Peapack, and we just to make our voices known, even in rural areas, that we support equal rights for African Americans."

Ridge High School 11th grader Christopher Kosakowski said he came to the march "to protest the recent killings of innocent black people.

"I think that there needs to be reform in the policing system in order to mitigate the amount of force used and a lot of instances, when it is totally unnecessary," he said. "There also needs to be justice reform. I think it's very necessary for my generation to step up at this point."

He added that it's important "to show our politicians that everyone wants this, and not just a select few.

"Even smaller towns and communities like our own, really support the reforms that are necessary to make America a safer place and what we believe in."

Several local officials were seen among the crowd, including Somerset County Freeholder Sara Sooy.

"As a Bernardsville resident, we have this local thing we call the Bernardsville Bubble and it's about time we hear people stand up and speak out," she said. "We need a united front against racism, not only here on the home front, but throughout this entire country."

1973 Death Recalled

One resident attending the march recalled a tragic incident from 47 years ago in Bernardsville when a young man of color was shot and killed by a borough police officer.

In January 1973, William "Rabbit" Wells, who had attended the Bonnie Brae School in Liberty Corner, was shot and killed by Bernardsville Officer William Sorgie following an incident at a borough bar.

The officer was at the bar to break up a fight that night and shot Wells when he thought his own life was in danger. There were protests and allegations of racism at the time, but Sorgie was not charged following an investigation as it was ruled an accident.

The incident was later the subject of a 1997 book, "The Shooting of Rabbit Wells: An American Tragedy," by author William Loizeaux.

Mark Thompson of Bernardsville, who stood in the Olcott Square triangle to watch the march Saturday, said couldn't remember a protest like the one under way, although he believed one had occurred following the death of Wells.

"That was the same thing as now," he said. "I really hope some change happens."



Protest March in Bernardsville
Jun 6, 2020



0:32

'No Justice, No Peace'

Jun 7, 2020