

9 minutes and 29 Seconds: George Floyd, one year after his death

Von Michelle Chavez

On May 25th 2020, the whole world watched how Derek Chauvin knelt on George Floyd's neck for 9 minutes and 29 seconds, taking away his life. Both Floyd's murder and the many subsequent events that followed were outrageous. How was something like what happened to George Floyd possible? And why did so many protests turn violent? In my view the answer to these questions is deep seated systemic racism. Racism in all its forms, kinds, shapes and levels.

For many black people, it all starts in school, if not before. In 2014 I had the opportunity to do a fellowship in Saint Paul, Minnesota. During this time, I learned about the struggles that minorities face in this state. Indigenous, Black and Latinx are less likely to finish high school. Within these groups, Black students are 8 times as likely to be suspended as their white peers, twice higher than the national average.

In my view, the violence that erupted during the BLM protests in Minnesota escalated to a great extent due to the lack of an immediate condemnation of what happened by the president in office at the time. A further reason for this escalation is owing to the fact that what happened to George Floyd has happened to so many Afro-Americans over the years and decades. In different circumstances and in different ways, many people have lost their lives because of the stigma created by the color of their skin, at the hands of people who are supposed to serve and protect them. The difference this time was that it was filmed by several people. The video footage from different angles left no doubt that an unarmed Black man was brutally murdered by a white police officer.

Through social media networks and various communication channels, many of us saw different images of oppression and abuse of power, in which people protesting peacefully were beaten and manhandled by the police. On the flip side, we also watched images of the looting of shopping malls and vandalism during the protests, which were widely disseminated on the Internet and TV. In view of this, I wanted to know the perceptions and insights of American citizens in the light of the murder of George Floyd and the events that followed. Thus, I spoke with Amanda Weitekamp, a lawyer and public defender for the state of Minnesota. I asked her about how she perceived the situation in Minnesota after the murder of George Floyd. In her words, the time after Floyd's murder was a really crazy time and she wondered how it would turned out if the murder hadn't occurred during a pandemic. If we would be where we are today in terms of the global coverage and ripple effects the murder caused. On that very day, Amanda had certain work activities to undertake at the Minneapolis court premises. It was right after finding out about Floyd's murder. She had to communicate to the sitting judge that day that she could not perform her duties as an attorney owing to the events that had just taken place. To quote her: *"I just watched somebody get killed... That was just so overwhelming to be so public*

and so...blasé demeanor of the officers and care so little about them sucking the life out of someone right under their knee while being recorded.”

That night, she and most of her neighbors stayed up late. *“It was summertime, you could smell the fires burning, you could see the ash falling from all the fires, and hear the helicopters.”* That was the first night of almost two weeks of hearing helicopters all day long and staying up late at night. She said that, during those days, some of her non-white friends were being harassed when they were outside their own houses, even on a balcony or a porch, by people in trucks with no license plates who were photographing them. Such things were not happening to white people. For this reason, they would stay up, keep the lights on, sit on the front porch, keep watch, hoping that nobody was up to any mischief in her neighborhood.

She also told me that her Facebook feed blew up with people talking trash about the twin cities (Minneapolis and Saint Paul), making posts pro-police, and anti-Black lives matter. She thinks, that this happened because they had only seen the footage about looting and rioting that the media had been putting out there. In her view, as a white person who is privileged to be educated and who has been able to still have a job in spite of the pandemic, she does not have the right to judge people stealing sandwiches from a supermarket.

Images of buildings being stoned and set on fire were on the news, and this was highly condemned, but Amanda thinks that without all that extra form of protesting, the situation would have simply moved on. *“Everybody knows George Floyd’s name now and everybody knows how he was killed”*. I personally understand Amanda's point, although violence is not the answer, I think it is a valid approach to put ourselves in the shoes of people who have been protesting for many years without being heard.

Another thing that Amanda told me, which I think a lot of people don't know, is that shortly after Floyd’s murder, a strong sense of community emerged, with neighborhoods taking care of neighbors, helping in the removal of trash and helping with food drives. It really brought a lot of people together too. Unfortunately, there are some bad stuff still happening in the area where George Floyd was killed, but there is also some beauty over there. For example, the George Floyd Global Memorial which was built there, a place where people are coming from all over the country to have a connection to what was a horrible moment. A lot of people are still talking about what happened. And because of that, people are also talking about Breonna Taylor, Philando Castile and other victims of police violence.

Interviewer: Michelle Chávez

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This article reflects the opinion of the author and does not necessarily represent the position of the EJBW.