

‘When one of us dies, we all die’: For many Black Bostonians, Minneapolis suddenly feels close to home

By [Dasia Moore](#) and [Victoria McGrane](#) Globe Staff, Updated May 29, 2020, 8:30 p.m.



Hope Coleman, mother of Terrence Coleman, a 31-year-old Black man with a mental health disability who was fatally shot by a Boston police officer, spoke to the crowd at Friday's protest in the South End. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

When Bernadine Desanges first watched the video, the 30-year-old Dorchester woman began to sob uncontrollably.

On the screen she saw George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man, pleading for his life as

Demonstrators took to the streets in Los Angeles, New York, Louisville, and other cities across the country. In Boston's South End, a group of hundreds assembled in Peters Park, led by the grass-roots activist group Mass Action Against Police Brutality.

The protest was held in honor of Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery. Police officers fatally shot Taylor, who was 26, in her Louisville, Ky., home. Arbery, who was 25, was fatally shot by two white men, a father and son, while he jogged through a residential neighborhood in Glynn County, Georgia.

But beyond the demonstrations, Black people in and around Boston found themselves in the familiar position of leaning on one another.

“As a people in this country, as Black people in this country, part of our spirit is the connection that we have,” said Tanisha Sullivan, president of Boston's NAACP. “Through all that we have been through in this country, our spirit is collective.”

That fellowship makes this a very particular sort of pain — one that is specific to Black people.

“It's a really painful time for Black people generally,” said Jordan Thompson, a racial justice organizer at ACLU-New Hampshire. “It's sort of suffocating. It's overwhelming.”

“The trauma that is induced every time you go on social media . . . It's very, very difficult,” he said.

Malia Lazu did not watch the video of the moments leading up to Floyd's death. The 43-year-old Roxbury woman helped organize protests in 2009 after police fatally shot Oscar Grant, a 22-year-old Black man, in Oakland, Calif. Though she felt it was “important to bear witness,” she also felt it was important to spare herself from some trauma.

“It's terrorism,” she said

“It’s evoking feelings of 2014, 2015, leading up to Ferguson,” said Dart Adams, a 44-year-old who was born and raised in Roxbury. The protests that erupted in that Missouri city after a white police officer shot a Black teenager named Michael Brown in 2014 still resonate today.

“People are afraid of violence erupting, but they’re not willing to address the root causes,” Adams said.

State Representative Nika Elugardo, who represents Jamaica Plain on Beacon Hill, spent Friday morning discussing events in Minneapolis with other Black elected officials from the state, part of a regular series of calls and chats the group holds to support one another.

“A lot of us feel constantly retraumatized and that we have to be strong, anyway, stronger than people who aren’t being traumatized, and work next to them, watching them do things that are making the problem worse, sometimes accidentally, sometimes callously,” she said, describing the tenor of the morning’s conversation.

“Honestly, it’s traumatic for a lot of people, people of color who I’ve spoken to, it’s triggering and traumatic,” said Boston City Councilor Lydia Edwards.

For many, Edwards said, the death of Floyd represents a combination of “microaggressions and built-up incidences that they’ve had with the police,” a reminder that in any moment, “you could run into a cop like him anywhere in the United States.”

Edwards also believes the recent killings have fostered new impatience with local politicians to enact real policy change to tackle racism and other discrimination.

“There’s a lack of patience, especially for cities or mayors, [for] this mayor for claiming that they’re doing racial equity work and it stops there,” said Edwards.

Mayor Martin J. Walsh, in an e-mail, said he understood that watching the video of Lloyd being killed is more painful for people of color.

“To survive as a community, we must recognize and act on the belief that every single life has equal value. That’s what we believe and that’s what we will fight for,” Walsh said, adding that he had “an emotional and productive conversation” on the issues with the City Council Friday morning.

Sullivan, the NAACP president, said that she and other advocates within the city will be examining state and city policies around policing in hopes of pushing for legal protections that will help prevent police killings of unarmed civilians in Boston. While Boston has not seen an incident that has become a national flashpoint, Sullivan said that does not mean the city is immune.

She also noted that police brutality is far from the only issue facing Black people in Boston. She noted that inequalities in education, inadequate funding for community-based violence-prevention work, and disparate health outcomes are also at issue.

“Those are knees on our neck,” she said. “There is still more work to do, and we will do it.”

Massachusetts Attorney General Maura Healey said white people need to shoulder that work. “The burden cannot be on Black people,” she said.

Healy addressed the killings of Floyd, Arbery, and Taylor on Twitter Friday morning, saying she held an office-wide call on the “murders” and calling on white residents to do more to address racism in their own lives and communities.

For her part, Desanges tries to bring solace to other Black people in her life through regular check-ins and humor. A motivational speaker and entrepreneur, she frequently addresses race and inequality in her work.

“As Black people, we are resilient,” she said. Still, Desanges wondered aloud why so much resilience and perseverance are required of Black people — even in the face of unspeakable loss.

“It’s painful to wake up every day not knowing whether your life is valued.”

She also wondered at how the rest of the world carried on, barely touched by that loss. The next time a Black person was senselessly killed, she wondered, “What would happen if the world truly stopped?”

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then-police officer Derek Chauvin, who is white, pressed his knee into Floyd's neck. "I can't breathe," Floyd repeated, until eventually he lay motionless.

Millions of people around the country and the world have now seen the same video and heard the same desperate last words echoing from a Minneapolis street. But viewing it as a Black American — like Desanges is, like Floyd was — registers on a different, deeper plane. It is at once visceral, agonizing, and familiar: A rolling tide of grief.

"When one of us dies, we all die. We all feel the pain," said Desanges. "I grieve Black life every day."

And so she sobbed.

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By the time Chauvin was arrested and charged with third-degree murder on Friday, Floyd's death had already unleashed a wave of sorrow, anger, and demands for justice far beyond the protests that shook Minneapolis.