

Teens lead and learn Find rallies scary but empowering

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Body

Bronx high-schooler and student activist Leanne Nunes has been to her fair share of protests - and her harrowing experience in one of the demonstrations sweeping the city in the wake of George Floyd's death was the most frightening and empowering yet.

"That was one of the scariest moments of my life," recalled Nunes, 18, who found herself crouching in a lower Manhattan stairwell early Monday after baton-wielding police dispersed her group.

"When I was crouching in that corner, I felt like a kid hiding in the dark from the monsters you thought were in your room," added Nunes, who saw a friend trampled by cops in the melee.

But Nunes, who banded together with other city teens to help organize a segment of marchers, said the experience also affirmed the importance of young people participating in the protests over police brutality exploding across the country in the past week.

"Our group of youth - we started saying some chants and organizing the crowd," she said.

"I have so much respect for the adults in the space, but sometimes their voices can overshadow ours," she said. "The youth have the special advantage of calling for a new future...and actually trying to be that generation that's not just going to talk about the change but actually make it happen."

Even as they contend with the coronavirus lockdown, school responsibilities and wary parents, students across the city - from experienced activists to first-time protesters - are finding ways to make their voices heard in streets and classrooms as demonstrations grip the city.

Some, like 15-year-old Abbie Jobe, wanted to protest, but stayed home to respect their parents' wishes.

Abbie lives in the Bronx - a long haul from the Manhattan protest she wanted to attend, especially with limited public transit. Her mom was nervous about a confrontation with police.

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"If something did happen and I got arrested, my mom isn't working at the moment and who's going to pay for me getting out?" she said. "I don't know what could happen."

Abbie instead threw her energy into helping plan a school-wide virtual forum on the protests and history of police violence for her classmates at Manhattan's Eleanor Roosevelt High School, where Abbie is one of the few black students in her grade.

"We're trying to make a day on Thursday when we focus on the events and the history behind us and the privilege many of the kids in my school have to not worry and not speak on that," she said.

For other teens, the protests sparked uncomfortable conversations with family.

Cheryl Chan, a senior at Roosevelt High, spoke to her grandparents - first-generation Chinese immigrants - for more than an hour about the protests and anti-black racism in the Chinese-American community over the weekend.

"We talked...about recognizing their own privileges," she said. At the end of the conversation, her grandfather surprised her by allowing her to march.

"On Saturday, he actually drove us up to Union Square. That's all it took, was having a conversation."

The charged conversations also spilled over into virtual classrooms early this week, with many teachers scrapping lesson plans to host free-flowing conversations about the protests.

In general, teens are better-equipped to take on thorny conversations than their adult mentors fear, Cheryl said.

"[We] understand and know how to have these conversations...we can lead it on our own," she said, adding that teens are already hashing out many of these debates in other spaces. "In terms of social media, we've held people a lot more accountable."

Kimberly Martinez, a junior at Central Park East High School, said some of the same tensions that have coursed through the public conversation about the protests - including disagreement about the role of violence in the demonstrations - arose in discussions with her mostly black and Latino classmates.

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