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DIVERSITY: Activists say protests need to lead to policies

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By **MARTY LEVINE**

Six local activists — some who have turned their protest efforts into political and policy-making posts — told the Diversity Forum what pushes them to keep working toward a more equitable world and why more people should join their efforts, at the July 30 panel, “From Protest to Policy: Environmental Justice, Economic Equity and Community Activism.”

“Protest to policy is literally what my life has been,” Olivia Bennett, a member of Allegheny County Council, said in the online presentation. “The first thing that got me out in the streets was Trayvon Martin,” — a Black teen who was shot to death in Florida in 2012 by a white man on the excuse that Martin’s presence was suspicious; Martin’s killer was later acquitted. “From there it has been a continual presence on the street.”

However, Bennett said, “Protest is not sustainable. So how do you continue making change? That is exactly what brought me to office. We need policy makers in those streets who will actually listen to (protest) and actually do something about that.”

Although she has been encouraged by local efforts toward police reform legislation, she cautioned: “The policy should never come from the top down; it should always come from the bottom up.”

Fred Brown, president and CEO of the local Forbes Fund, which helps build the management capacity of nonprofits, highlighted the different life experiences for white and Black people: Even after protesting, white people can walk back to their lives, while for Black people, the issues affect them daily and personally.

“What’s very troublesome is when white people decide they want to do something great for Black people,” Brown said, then walk away to devise proposals, only later seeking approval from the community most directly affected.

The real question to address through policy, he said, is, "How do you support humanity? How do we put people at the center of our ecosystem?"

"There is no such thing as equity at this point," he added. When white people tell him they didn't realize America's systemic racism was this bad until the most recent protests, he wonders: "Do they hear us? Are they listening?"

"Since Black people have been here in the United States, our struggle has been for freedom," said Carl Redwood, adjunct instructor in the School of Social Work and community organizer with the Pittsburgh Hill District Consensus Group, which aims to build leadership among Hill residents through grassroots organizing.

"We are abolitionists," he said. "We believe that prisons and police and all other institutions that have put violence on Black people must be abolished and replaced ... The current system we live in must be redesigned and reformed. ... It's important that we bring together a national Black liberation movement."

"Even this Diversity Forum shows that we are in a different moment," said Anupama Jain, executive director of Pittsburgh's Gender Equity Commission and a former Pitt professor. "What people are protesting is the lie of the American dream. ... We do not have equity in our country." And even policies designed for "uplift and improvement," she said, have helped more white people than people of color, LGBT people or those with disabilities. "If we create a new policy, who are we leaving out? Who is not in the room?"

Jerry Dickinson, faculty member in the School of Law, said his activism against evictions of Black residents in the poorer sections of several world cities, and his current research into eviction rates (finding them highest for single African-American mothers), prompted him to run for the 18th state congressional district, to represent Pittsburgh.

Although he did not win, he still sounds warnings about local conditions for Black residents: "This is one of the least livable regions for African Americans," Dickinson said, citing a loss of Black population due to lack of jobs and housing, as well as bad air quality. "In the Pittsburgh region, we've left behind the Black and brown community" as we've transformed from manufacturing to education and medicine in past decades.

"You don't have to win (election) to make a difference," noted panel moderator Kristin Kanthak, faculty member in the Department of Political Science in the Dietrich School of Arts & Sciences. Just running for office provides an example for others who may be inspired to follow suit, she said.

Hillary Roman, Americans with Disabilities Act coordinator for the City of Pittsburgh, noted that it took many years for the disability community to agitate for, and achieve, the ADA law in 1990. "Try to think, how would you turn this into a policy?" she said of any issue that prompts public protest. "And understand it's going to take a long time."

Taking questions from panel attendees, Kanthak noted that "the Department of Africana Studies exists because students insisted on it. Students protested."

What advice would panelists have to students, particularly incoming students, who wanted to get a start turning protest into policy?

"Start with a non-colonizing attitude," said Jain, by working on an issue that affects you personally. Don't start by trying to devise solutions for other people, she said. Start with any injustices you see in your life. "You will not be colonizing someone else's experience and you will be making important change."

"It's difficult to give a student a real experience in a classroom framework," to teach them to turn protest into policy, Brown said. "I don't want a student for one semester. I want a student for many years." He has found that such long-term experiences engage students to continue their work in the community.

"We haven't put our minds to this thing called equity," he said. "It's an interest and not a commitment. We get caught up in many courageous conversations as if we're doing something. ... That's like changing the icing on a cake."

Asked why there was not yet a physical location for Pitt's Community Engagement Center (CEC) in the Hill District, Redwood replied: "It is not a place, but there are some staff in place," as well as students involved in ongoing community projects. But he was cautious about future relations between Pitt and Hill residents, since the University "has not had a good history there. Pitt has been a gentrifier in the past."

"A lot of Pitt's outreach now has been good," he allowed. "We have to make sure (the CEC) doesn't become an outpost of Pitt." It should not be "Pitt in the community, it is the community in Pitt."

Asked what white Pitt administrators should do to increase the low percentage of African-American students and faculty at the University, he said: "I don't know how they recruit football players, but I know they do it"; the same should be done to recruit Black faculty and staff, he said.

"Folks are just going to have to give up their positions," Bennett said. "White people are just going to have to step down from their positions of power and give them to Black people and people of color. If we're really serious, we really need to recruit Black teachers and other teachers of color so students can see themselves in that way."

People should not sit in their jobs for decades anyway, Brown opined. "I'm never anywhere longer than five years, because I pick somebody to replace me" shortly after arriving.

Concluded Jain: "Equity is a commitment, not a special interest we get to once in a while. It's going to take some visionary thinking."

Noting that people are eager to go back to normal after COVID-19, Brown added: "That normal still kills Black and brown people every day. I'm not interested in that normal."

"We really have to go to the root causes," Redwood said. "We're inside a capitalist system that makes sure a whole bunch of people are living in poverty. ... There's a whole system built over centuries" that depends on cheap labor. "The danger is, the model we are told to strive for is this so-called middle class. The middle class doesn't work unless you have people in poverty."

"Our goal has to be human development," he said. "We're stunting the development of human beings right now. The people who are benefiting from the current system ain't going to be giving up without a fight."

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