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Black Lives Matter

MARCH 17, 2016 BY HANNAH BROADBENT

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BY EMILY NESS | the Statesman

On the rainy evening of February 26, 2012, 17 year old Trayvon Martin was walking home from Sanford, Florida's local 7-Eleven store when he was confronted, shot and killed by George Zimmerman, a self-appointed neighborhood watch volunteer, who was patrolling the community.



Nekima Levy-Pounds spoke at UMD on Monday, March 14, 2016

Blood spatter covered the Arizona Tea and the pack of Skittles that Martin had bought for his little brother. The two had planned to watch the NBA All Star Game together that evening.

Unfortunately, that would never happen.

Despite the fact that Martin was unarmed at the time of his death, Zimmerman was found not guilty on the grounds of self defense.

What was despair soon turned into rage.

Flames engulfed the city.

Roses lined the road.

Eerily similar to the Equal Rights Protests of the 1960's, Martin Luther King Junior's famous "I Have a Dream" speech seemed to echo throughout the streets, where, once again, individuals protested for equality.

Trayvon Martin's death, along with the deaths of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Sandra Bland and more sparked the beginning of the Black Lives Matter Movement.

On March 14, the University of Minnesota Duluth extended the Movement's mission by inviting Nekima Levy-Pounds, an award-winning professor of law, civil rights attorney, Minneapolis NAACP president, and nationally recognized expert on social justice issues to speak.

A force to be reckoned with, Nekima captivated the audience as soon as she stepped up to the podium.

Born shortly after Martin Luther King Junior's assassination in a time where Jim Crow laws were still present, Nekima learned of conditions in which people were judged by the color of their skin rather than their character early on.

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This injustice inspired her to become an attorney.

During her time in law school, Nekima looked more closely at the language of America's Amendments. What she found was shocking.

The Thirteenth Amendment states: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."

The word 'except' is what shocked her. Nekima argues that this is a precursor to a new form of slavery – a form of slavery in which people are not equally treated under the law. For a nation flying its flag of freedom with pride, Nekima believed that this was unacceptable. She wanted to make a difference.

"When the Black Lives Movement began in August of 2013, I watched things unfold from a distance and it impacted me deeply. I remember sobbing, wondering what I could possibly do to help. After what happened in Ferguson, I left almost immediately, with no idea what to expect," she said.

Upon arriving in Ferguson, Nekima witnessed instances of injustice that changed her forever.

On the third consecutive night of protesting, police fired several rounds of tear gas and stun grenades into a crowd of protesters without warning. Nekima was among these protestors. For what seemed like forever, she could not see or breathe. Red and blue lights – ironically, the colors chosen to represent the land of the free, flashed all around her. When Nekima was finally able to open her eyes, she was moved by what she saw.

"Despite being sprayed with tear gas, people continued to protest. Their determination inspired me," she said.

Since leaving Ferguson, Nekima has participated in acts of protest, such as, shutting down highway 94 and marching through the Mall of America. Despite obstacles, she has seen beautiful things.

"I have never seen anything like this in America. Despite barriers of age, race, able/disable, etc, people from all walks of life have come together to fight for justice," she said.

Nekima hopes that as a result of these efforts, people will someday *truly* be free.

"As an advocate for racial and social justice, I feel that it is my duty to educate others about the challenges that our most vulnerable populations face in this country, as well as, advocate solutions. This can only happen when individuals put aside their differences and work towards justice and equity for the good of all, and especially for the least of these," she said.

Nekima closed her speech, leaving the audience truly moved.

"We must face race with courage," she said. "I am proud of the UMD community and MPIRG for facilitating this timely discussion on the Black Lives Matter Movement and race relations in this country. The fact that there were so many people willing to engage and get outside of their comfort zone gives me hope that things can change," she added.

Editor-in-Chief Nicole Brodzik sits down with Chancellor Black and asks questions from UMD students.



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