

Episode 64: Protest to Progress

In this special episode, we share some highlights from a panel of young activists and organizers from the Minnesota Daily's First Amendment Celebration.

Megan Germundson and Yoko Vue

ADVERTISEMENT FROM OUR SPONSOR: ACR Homes has essential jobs and internships for students. Find peace of mind and job security with their flexible and rewarding part-time jobs by caring for the needs of people who have disabilities. Because ACR Homes offers paid training, your compassion for others and desire to make a difference is more important than your previous experience. To apply contact universityoffice@acrhomes.com or visit their website at www.acrhomes.com.

MEGAN GERMUNDSON: Hi everyone, I'm Megan Germundson.

YOKO VUE: I'm Yoko Vue, an intern for the Daily.

GERMUNDSON: And you're listening to "In The Know," a podcast by the Minnesota Daily.

NAT SOUND: FAST-PACED BEAT AND SLOW FADE OUT UNDER TRACKS

VUE: So, last Friday, The Daily had its annual First Amendment Celebration, and this year, like everything else these days, we held it over Zoom.

GERMUNDSON: The celebration centers around the five freedoms protected by the First Amendment: freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of the press and the right to peacefully assemble and petition the government for redress of grievances.

VUE: And in today's special episode, we edited highlights from our panel with Daniela Kunkel-Linares, John Kipper and Olivia House. These young activists joined us to have an open dialogue about the freedom of petition, the power of protest and the impacts of a summer of unrest.

JOHN KIPPER: I think this has forced a lot of introspection.

It's just a lot of soul searching and trying to find the end purpose or the light at the end of the tunnel and a reason why I'm doing what I'm doing.



GERMUNDSON: Here's John Kipper, a first-year student at Mitchell Hamline School of Law. John was involved in advocating for the removal of a racist professor and he helped create a department of ethnic studies at Augsburg.

KIPPER: And at the same time, just keeping that bigger picture and historical picture in mind. That while these are challenging times, these are the same issues that we've constantly faced generation after generation. And I think now, with the presence of social media, being able to spread messages so much quicker and faster, it's a lot harder to not look. And while it's really tough to constantly have to see Black people being killed and especially Black women killed every day. And then the news and media cycles it's. It's forcing us to consider — at least it's forcing me to consider — and look within and start thinking about how to be more proactive as an individual, and then both how to support a community as well.

OLIVIA HOUSE: Yeah, I have to agree.

GERMUNDSON: That's Olivia House. She's also a recent Augsburg graduate with a degree in graphic design. In the past few years, Olivia has been active in student organizing, mutual aid efforts, protests following the police killing of George Floyd, movements to Abolish the Police and her artwork has been displayed on murals and banners at numerous protests.

HOUSE: And it's been a summer of trying to figure out how to heal or how to deal with trauma, day-to-day trauma and heal from that. So I can actually live and that's been tough.

And so that's why art has been a really big part of what I've been doing this summer. Since then, because it's both really powerful and impactful. It's also just really healing as well, especially the mural work that I've been doing, it's been healing. But it's also been tough, like I was hired for my first post-grad job in the midst of all this. It's hard to imagine going to work and working for these corporations on these projects that seem so minimal, because as soon as I clock out, I'm going to a protest or I'm designing posters for it or going to paint a mural. And it just makes my day seem like the work that I do is just not meaningful. So, that's been hard to reconcile that and figure that out within myself. How do I make a living and also feel good about the work I do. It's been a tough summer. And like John said, [I've done] a lot of introspection and trying to figure out where we go from here.

DANIELA KUNKEL-LINARES: I just want to say thank you, Olivia, for your honesty on how difficult it is, because I think youth activism has always been like, 'Oh, look how cool youth are.' But it's exhausting for youth, especially when they're not given the same resources that huge nonprofits and organizations in the Twin Cities are given.

GERMUNDSON: This is Daniela. She's a fourth-year student at the University of Minnesota. And this past summer, along with other former Bloomington alum and current students, she formed the Bloomington Antiracist Coalition. Their mission is to create antiracist changes in Bloomington Public Schools, like developing a more inclusive curriculum and removing school law enforcement officers.

KUNKEL-LINARES: The youth are doing so much more than I ever thought they were doing. And they're capable of so much. It's empowering to be able to see that from people who are younger than me and people who are around my same age. It's empowering to see how much they're able to do, but it's also just sad that they weren't able to have a normal summer.

HOUSE: No, totally Daniela. Actually, you hit a really good point in that. Like, youth and largely Black youth didn't have a chance to have a normal summer. I talk to people and they're like, 'Oh, we were able to go to the cabin for a couple of weekends,' and things like that when none of the youth of color I know were able to do that. And they still had to enroll in school this semester.

So that's been an interesting thing to look at after this summer too, is that we're just forced to go into these everyday lives and aren't supported in that way. There are not a lot of resources out there for us to do that successfully. So, I'm just really hoping that schools start to understand that and that students are given resources to process everything that happened this summer.

GERMUNDSON: I'm kind of curious about social media, and what you all think about the sort of social media activism. I also want to ask Olivia too, as a designer, there were so many, infographic explainers — I was seeing them constantly — on social media. So, I'm curious what you all think about social media activism and the effectiveness of those explainers?

HOUSE: Totally. I have mixed emotions about it. It was exciting for me as a designer to see these graphics become so popular and so informative and so important. It was just a way of seeing how the power of designs, because the better design, the easier to read it, the more it's shared, and the more information that's spread. So, I thought that was huge. And especially in the midst of the protest and being on the ground, that was a huge way to spread resources and information and numbers, all of that. It was huge. And I think during that first week I spent. I don't even want to say how many hours on social media each day. It was a lot over a third of my day. Just because, it was the easiest and the best way to spread information, but then there's the other side of that coin where misinformation was easily spread and performative activism was huge with that. So I think it's great, we just have to be mindful of how we use it.

KUNKEL-LINARES: Yeah. I would agree with that. Seeing things on Instagram and Twitter, it's so easy to consume. So, there's often not enough time to really reflect on what it is that you're consuming, or who is putting out the information, or where they got their information from. So I think I agree with Olivia where that was frustrating, just seeing some of the misinformation that was going on. But in those first two weeks, it was so incredible seeing how much information could be shared on an Instagram story and, in a way that Instagram and TikTok never imagined their platforms being used. I am so grateful for Instagram this summer, because we made our Instagram page for the Bloomington Anti-Racist Coalition saying that we were looking to get SROs removed from our school — the school resource officers, the police force — out of our schools. And then, we started following other pages from around the suburbs, the Twin Cities and then across the state of Minnesota. We were all able to get in contact because of that. Now we're able to work as a coalition together, and that would have never happened without these Instagram accounts that we all made, so that we could tell people from our high schools what we were working on. So, I think seeing that and the coalitions that have been able to be built from social media has been really powerful.

KIPPER: I want to qualify anything I'm going to say with I'm a luddite, and I just have a personal account where I have a couple friends. It was a good way of making sure people were safe, being able to check in, especially within the initial [moments of protest]. And then as we got into June and July, it was really frustrating. [Be]cause I'm from Bloomington, and just seeing so many of the Bloomington kids post a black square, then go to a cabin and then complain about having to wear masks, and just how it became a way for them to be like, 'Okay, racism solved, we can move on now,' without being able to grasp the full brevity of the situation, is something that's really frustrating. Especially to go back to the issue of Black youth, where Black youth fully understand what's going on and seemingly diminishing that, and saying that, 'Oh, the kids are too young to understand.' I think that's something that's one of the downsides of social media is that it can be used to undercut how much youth can truly understand what's going on.

GERMUNDSON: Going back to you, John, going back to your time at Augsburg, what kind of challenges did you face as a student there as you pushed for the removal of the racist professor that was there, and if you could just talk about what happened with that situation and if you experienced any pushback or had support with that?

KIPPER: Yeah, I think the biggest issue to mention first and foremost is that the women of color were unanimously targeted with backlash, and a close friend ended up with acute stress syndrome and a GI disorder from it. The huge issue with that is that it just really showed that for a lot of professors, issues of race are in this realm of hypothetical. Whereas for a lot of non-white students, this is very much a lived reality where we can't remove ourselves and say, 'Well, hypothetically, the N-word should be allowed to be used because X, Y and Z,' when we're still living with day-to-day consequences. Something that stuck with me the most from dealing with that professor is just having to fight so many seemingly dead tropes when they just re-manifested in more micro-aggressive behaviors instead of overt racism.

GERMUNDSON: We asked the panel about facing adversity as young activists and what kinds of challenges they've experienced. Olivia talked about how she often feels that older generations aren't taking young activists seriously.

HOUSE: We're sitting, learning about the civil rights movement and comparing it to things happening today. So much has changed since then and also so little. And we're just fed up about it. I think we are valid in thinking that we can change this country, because we can. So there's been adversity for sure. These old people in power, who we have for so long been trying to convince them — and honestly, that convincing is huge with our peers, with our family, with our friends — trying to convince them to see our humanity and to see us as we wholly are and how these things affect us. Just trying to convince people to care, it's hard. I understand that the generation before, they had kids, they have families, they have to think about that, but it's just so frustrating to be working so hard toward something and to have so many people not care. I just think that's the hardest thing to come out of this, is that even they can watch that video of George Floyd being killed and still be like, 'Well, I don't know, what are we going to do without the police?' That just blows my mind and that's half the battle every day. Half of it is just trying to convince and show people that say that they care about you to care about the issues that affect you.

GERMUNDSON: And finally, we wanted to know what gives them hope.

KIPPER: Hopefully there won't need to be a next generation of students that have to go through what we did. But at the same time, being able to go to a four-year university and be able to meet people like Olivia and other people on campus who have such different paths in life and to intersect at that one moment, and then go forth into the world and to still be connected, not only through activism work, but as friends and be able to socialize and to still reconnect, I think that's what gives me hope.

HOUSE: So, similar to John, I would say the community that's been built around all this. Then also through social media, we're so connected. So, like John was saying, we're hoping that the next generation doesn't have to go through what we do. And I think they won't because, we're going to be here, we're going to have their backs, and we're going to grow and make sure that this is still happening through everything. So, that really gives me hope. And yeah, I would say this summer has been really hopeful through the uprisings. I think the uprisings and seeing everything night after night, that gives me hope because we are taking a stand and saying that we're not going to be dismissed this time.

KUNKEL-LINARES: Yeah. I'm just going to say basically the same thing that Olivia and John have said, just meeting people and our lives intersect at this one moment, and it doesn't just have to be this one moment, you can take this beyond the work that we have been able to do together this summer.

For me, reconnecting with some of my old friends from Bloomington who I hadn't talked to since fourth grade was so nice because now we can have a friendship, because of what we were able to do this summer. I think the youth give me a lot of hope, that they continue to show up every day while they continue to be dismissed. It's really powerful.

NAT SOUND: FADE IN FAST-PACED BEAT AND UNDER TRACKS

GERMUNDSON: As we've learned from our panelists, there is power in using your voice, and there is power in our right to protest.

VUE: Thank you to all of our panelists, and all of you who joined in on our annual First Amendment Celebration Zoom-cast.

GERMUNDSON: Thanks for listening. We'll be back next week.

TRACK MUSIC CREDITS: Music in today's episode was provided by © Fulgur Studios – 2019

NAT SOUND: FADE OUT "PUBLIC ENEMY TYPE BEAT"