The Black Lives Matter Movement

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TUME BISTY

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CHAPTER TWO

The Formation of a Movement

Although the Black Lives Matter name was coined in 2013, it was Michael Brown's death the following year that propelled a name and a hashtag into a full-fledged civil rights movement. On August 9, 2014, immediately after Brown was killed, gruesome images of his body lying in the Ferguson, Missouri, road raced through social media. It started with the St. Louis rapper Tef Poe, who tweeted a photo of Brown with the text: "The life less body of the unarmed 17 year old kid please help us expose this attempted cover."²⁰ Poe's photo was retweeted nearly fifty-three hundred times, and others at the scene were also tweeting details of Brown's killing. This widespread publicity sparked public outrage and captured the media's attention.

A group of activists, including Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, along with writer and activist Darnell Moore, coordinated what they called "freedom rides" to Missouri. People flocked to Ferguson from cities all over the United States, including New York; Chicago, Illinois; Portland, Oregon; Los Angeles, California; and Boston, Massachusetts. When Garza arrived, she was startled to see that many people carried signs or wore shirts emblazoned with "Black Lives Matter" and were shouting the slogan as they marched in support of Brown. Journalist and historian Jelani Cobb writes, "Within a few weeks of Brown's death, hundreds of people who had never participated in organized protests took to the streets." The result of that collective effort, says Cobb, was to expose Ferguson "as a case study of structural racism in America and a metaphor for all that had gone wrong since the end of the civil-rights movement."²¹

Spotlight on Racism

In using the term *structural racism*, Cobb is referring to a societal system in which Caucasians are assumed to be superior to other races. In such a system, which many are convinced exists in the United States, white people are afforded more advantages and privileges than people of color. Sociologists Keith Lawrence and Terry Keleher write, "It is a system of hierarchy and inequity, primarily characterized by white supremacy—the preferential treatment, privilege and power for white people at the expense

of Black, Latino, Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American, Arab and other racially oppressed people."²² One of the most important goals of the Black Lives Matter movement is building awareness of how pervasive racism is in American society. Activists have found that to be a challenging task, however, as white people often deny that racism is much of a problem.

The most threatening examples of racism are the instances where racial profiling is known to occur and when relationships between people of color and law enforce-

ment are volatile. But, activists say, there are numerous examples of racism that are not always so obvious. On a day-to-day basis, people of color are victims of discriminatory treatment that affects every aspect of their lives yet rarely makes news headlines. One family for whom racism is a near-constant source of stress, frustration, and fear is the Waters family from Dallas, Texas. The family lives in a wealthy North Dallas neighborhood. Both parents (Frances and James) are attorneys, and they are highly respected in their community. Yet they constantly face racism in their daily lives.

One disturbing occurrence was when Frances Waters was in a neighborhood bookstore shopping for a geography book for her son. She noticed that a store employee was following her and continued to do so wherever Frances moved throughout the store. The same thing happened on another occasion. That time, Frances became so frustrated at being shadowed that she returned several hundred dollars' worth of books she had purchased and ordered the books online instead. "I guess they think

"Within a few weeks of Brown's death, hundreds of people who had never participated in organized protests took to the streets."²¹

—Jelani Cobb, a journalist and historian from New York City I'm very dangerous, right?" she asks. Despite the fact that she is an attorney, as well as pastor of the family's church, "all they see is black,"²³ she says. Black people throughout the United States share her frustration, and for many, Black Lives Matter offers hope that things will get better.

A New Generation of Activists

The Black Lives Matter movement evolved in a loose, largely unplanned way. The name was a natural outgrowth of the #Black-LivesMatter hashtag that was created by Garza, Cullors, and Tometi. But the movement itself, fueled by outrage over Brown's death and the exoneration of his killer, was started by young, passionate civil rights activists from all over America. Referring to the movement as a "decentralized collection of grass-roots activists and groups," journalist Josh Hafner describes how it came together: through the actions of Black Lives Matter protesters who "rallied on the streets of cities around the nation where African Americans have been killed in police-involved shootings."²⁴

Black Lives Matter does not have a well-defined hierarchy or clear leaders. As a result, the movement has sometimes been criticized for lacking structure and focus. One critic was Oprah Winfrey, who said in a 2015 interview, "I think it's wonderful to march and to protest and it's wonderful to see all across the country, people doing it." Winfrey added, however, that marching alone is not enough. "What I'm looking for," she said, "is some kind of leadership to come out of this to say, 'This is what we want. This is what has to change, and these are the steps that we need to take to make these changes, and this is what we're willing to do to get it."25 Yet the young activists who have emerged as Black Lives Matter leaders take issue with anyone saying that the movement lacks leadership. They emphasize that not being under the leadership of just one or two people enables a decentralized approach, with many activists pursuing change in the way they believe to be most beneficial.

Young, Passionate, and Highly Motivated for Change

Among the most visible, and vocal, of the Black Lives Matter activists is a young black woman from St. Louis, Missouri, named



Johnetta Elzie. She grew up not far from where Brown was killed, and she now lives about two hours away. When she read about his death on Twitter, she drove to the scene where his body had lain in the street. "His body was gone but the blood was still there,"²⁶ says Elzie. Overcome with emotion, she was determined to get the message out to people to make them aware of what happened. She began live-tweeting from Ferguson and became one of the most prolific documenters of the murky details surrounding Brown's death. Through her involvement with what she calls "The Movement," Elzie became close friends with another young black activist, a former school administrator from Minneapolis, Minnesota, named DeRay Mckesson. In mid-August 2014, a week after Brown's death, Mckesson drove nine hours from his home in Minneapolis to Ferguson, where he met other activists, including Elzie. He shared her outrage over the injustice of Brown's killing as well as the high prevalence of black citizens who had been killed by

Activists DeRay Mckesson and Johnetta Elzie (both pictured) are among the most visible and vocal members of the Black Lives Matter movement. Both have sought to bring attention to police shootings of African Americans.

A Most Daring Feat

Black Lives Matter is made up of people from cities and towns throughout the United States. The movement is relatively unstructured; activists have the freedom to pursue their own civil rights actions however they see fit. This is exactly what thirty-year-old Brittany "Bree" Newsome did in 2015. The Confederate flag, which for many people represents pre–Civil War white supremacy and slavery, had flown for years on the grounds of the South Carolina state capitol building in Columbia. Frustrated over the lack of action to remove what she saw as a derogatory symbol, Newsome decided to do it herself.

On June 27, 2015, at five thirty in the morning, Newsome arrived at the capitol building dressed in full climbing gear and wearing a helmet. With police and other onlookers watching, she shimmied up the 30-foot (9.14-m) flagpole and removed the flag; immediately, photos of the bold undertaking began appearing on Twitter under the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag. When Newsome returned to the ground with the flag in hand, she was promptly arrested. Smiling brightly, she was led away in handcuffs to jail. She quickly became a social media hero, with celebrities, politicians, and civil rights activists tweeting their support for her under the hashtag #FreeBree. In her public statement, Newsome said: "We can't wait any longer. We can't continue like this another day. It's time for a new chapter where we are sincere about dismantling white supremacy and building toward true racial justice and equality." The charges against Newsome were dropped, and two weeks after her arrest, the South Carolina Legislature voted to remove the flag.

Quoted in Greg Botelho and Emanuella Gringerg, "Bree Newsome Hailed for Removing Confederate Flag," CNN, June 27, 2015. www.cnn.com.

police across the nation. Mckesson joined Elzie in live-tweeting what was taking place in Ferguson. A few days later he went back to Minneapolis but continued to return to Ferguson, making the 600-mile (966-km) commute every weekend. Finally, he quit his job to become a full-time activist and lived off money he had been saving. In a short time he and Elzie became well known for their involvement with Black Lives Matter.

Along with Mckesson and Elzie, a young black woman named Brittany Packnett has also become a prominent Black Lives Matter leader. Like Elzie, Packnett grew up in St. Louis, and she also took part in demonstrations after Michael Brown's killing. She says his death deepened her commitment to social justice. "It is about defending the humanity and the dignity of all people in this country and of people of color in particular,"²⁷ she says. Packnett is an educator, writer, and public speaker, as well as an activist. When then-president Barack Obama formed the Task Force on 21st Century Policing, he asked Packnett to be a part of it, and she accepted. Along with Mckesson, Elzie, and an activist named Samuel Sinyangwe, Packnett cofounded Campaign Zero, a reform campaign that aims to reduce police violence.

"People would not have heard about Ferguson if it wasn't for social media. And when I say social media, I mean Twitter."²⁹

—Samuel Sinyangwe, a data scientist and analyst who is active in Black Lives Matter Sinyangwe is another emerging leader in the Black Lives Matter movement. He grew up in Orlando, Florida, and as a boy attended soccer practice just a short distance from where Trayvon Martin was shot. "I used to go to that same 7/11 [as Martin] every day for a packet of Starburst," says Sinyangwe. "It could have been me. It really could have been anyone who looked like me."²⁸ When he heard about Michael Brown's shooting, Sinyangwe felt much the same as other black activists: that Brown should not

have been killed, that his death was an injustice. Sinyangwe began following Mckesson's live-tweeting from Ferguson, and the two began talking via social media and on the phone.

Growth Fueled by Social Media

Sinyangwe, who graduated from Stanford University, is a data scientist and policy analyst. He emphasizes the invaluable role that social media has played in the widespread recognition of Black Lives Matter. "People would not have heard about Ferguson if it wasn't for social media," he says. "And when I say social media, I mean Twitter." Beyond public awareness, social media has been a powerful force in the growth of the movement. "It allows people to organize and build a community where it previously has not been,"²⁹ says Sinyangwe. After the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag first appeared on social media in July 2013, its use grew and then declined sharply by July 2014. But according to a Center

Brittany Packnett attends a White House meeting with President Barack Obama in 2016. Packnett cofounded Campaign Zero, a reform effort that aims to reduce violence by police, especially against people of color.

for Media & Social Impact study, Brown's death in August caused the hashtag's use to soar to 52,288 tweets that month. The study determined that Brown's killing, together with the widespread protests and subsequent media publicity, launched Black Lives Matter from a slogan and hashtag to a national movement. Tens of millions of tweets have appeared with the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag.

Brittany Packnett

Brittany Packnett

All Black Lives Matter activists have been involved in social media, but Mckesson has emerged as the movement's social media leader. Packnett explains why, of the many people tweeting and posting images from the protests in Ferguson, Mckesson stood out more than anyone. "DeRay is really adept at telling very

A Future Civil Rights Leader

He is only eighteen years old, but Ziad Ahmed is already determined to be an activist for social justice. Ahmed is not black; he is Muslim American. But he refers to himself as "an unapologetic progressive activist" who is a strong advocate of the Black Lives Matter movement. He is so devoted to the movement, in fact, that he used it as a focal point while filling out his application to Stanford University. In response to a question about what matters most to him and why, Ahmed wrote "#BlackLivesMatter" exactly one hundred times. He says he wanted the admissions officers to truly understand his "impatience for justice and the significance of it." He explains: "The hashtag conveys my frustration with the failure of [the] judicial system to protect the black community from violence, systemic inequity, and political disenfranchisement."

Ahmed was accepted to Stanford, as well as Yale and Princeton Universities. Whatever his future holds, he plans to use his voice to help bring about positive change and do all he can to help end racism.

Quoted in Avalon Zoppo, "Teen Accepted to Stanford After Writing #BlackLivesMatter 100 Times on Application," NBC News, April 5, 2017. www.nbcnews.com.

succinct stories," she says, "so it'd be, 'I'm running from tear gas #Ferguson' or 'I have to sleep under my steering wheel to get away from the police #Ferguson.' There is something clear and sharp about his language that really speaks to a lot of people."³⁰

Mckesson is a constant presence on Twitter, with nearly eight hundred thousand followers as of May 2017. He posts regularly about social justice issues, denouncing police who have been accused of killings or brutality. He is openly critical of law enforcement tactics that are unfair and unjust to black citizens. He speaks out against government decisions that erode people's civil rights. And as Mckesson continues to express his strong opinions through tweets, his followers keep growing—including those who hate him, as well as those who love and admire him. In a December 2015 CNN article, journalists Sara Sidner and Mallory Simon write, "He's been called everything from the new Martin Luther King Jr. to a devil intent on dividing America, depending on who is responding to him."³¹

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