



Compelled to Say Their Names

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by Joanne Feinberg

On June 28, 1844, laws prohibiting Black people from residing in Oregon were passed, and official permission was given to whip those who disobeyed the mandate.

On that same day 176 years later, an art installation was erected on the fence along the bike path in Ashland near Railroad Park. The "Say Their Names" memorial is a collection of multicolored T-shirts painted with the names of 125 Black people unjustly killed by police.

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd was murdered before our eyes. The anguish and anger I felt at this injustice had to be expressed. After reading about an art project in Los Angeles that honored Black people killed by police, I was inspired to create a memorial here in Ashland with a small team of impassioned friends.

Say Their Names is our effort to help ensure that victims of senseless murders are not forgotten, and to bring awareness to the often-invisible names and stories of Black people who have been victimized by racist police violence. We remember George Floyd, and every other Black life taken unjustly in the United States in the last 400 years.

As I reflected upon the far-reaching effects of systemic racism in our country, and was moved to take action, I felt it was important to consult with our Ashland BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) communities to hear their thoughts about the installation. We received encouragement that this was an important way to raise awareness in our predominantly white city — where my experience is that many white residents don't believe racism exists.

One observer said of the memorial, "I am glad that someone put up this art installation, and paid tribute to lives that have been needlessly taken. Ashland is a small town that has a

lot of liberal ideas, but I don't often see a lot of action from our community. That it hasn't been destroyed or taken down is really encouraging."

As we gathered to paint the first 100 T-shirts, our hearts were re-broken over and over again, as we learned the story of each person we were honoring, and were reminded that every name represents a human being who had a family and friends, hopes and dreams.

A visitor to Say Their Names told us, "This memorial is having a great impact in my life. When I first discovered it, my family and I were out for a walk at sunset. We read their names and cried. Why does this happen? How much longer until we remember love?"

The memorial is a place to process our grief arising from violence and injustice, as there are few physical spaces where we are able to do that collectively. Visitors tenderly reattach T-shirts loosened by wind, and parents talk to children about racism as they read aloud the names on each shirt.

We intentionally included Black women in the memorial, motivated by the work of #SayHerName — a movement that raises awareness of female victims of police brutality, to change the perception that victims are always male. Among the women honored at Railroad Park are 7-year-old Aiyana Mo'Nay Stanley-Jones; 92-year-old grandmother Kathryn Johnston; and Layleen Xtravaganza Cubilette-Polanco, a 27-year-old trans woman.

The loved ones of Breonna Taylor, the 26-year-old Black woman who was fatally shot in her home by Louisville police officers March 13, still wait for justice. With deep sorrow, we add a new shirt to the fence to honor 20-year-old Hakim Littleton, who was killed by police in Detroit July 10. Creating the memorial has strengthened our resolve to continue to demand justice and policy reform until meaningful change occurs.

With recent information coming to light about the 2019 arrest of OSF actor Tony Sancho in Ashland, and the horrific treatment he received from Jackson County sheriff's deputies, we can no longer be shocked by the racism that exists in our region, or ignore the systemic changes that need to be made locally and nationally.

We remain inspired by Rosa Parks. Her steadfast activism encourages us to always do the right thing in the fight for freedom, equality, justice and prosperity for all people. "You must never be fearful about what you are doing when it is right."

For more information, see www.saytheirnamememorial.org/

Joanne Feinberg is a filmmaker and director of programming at the Big Sky Documentary Film Festival, and was formerly director of programming at the Ashland Independent Film Festival. She raised three children in Ashland.