

Black Lives Matter Chapter Opens In Southern Utah

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TROY ANDERSON, THE FOUNDER OF THE NEW SOUTHERN UTAH CHAPTER OF BLACK LIVES MATTER, CHATS WITH MEMBERS OF THE BLACK STUDENT UNION AT DIXIE STATE UNIVERSITY. THE NEW CHAPTER IS THE THIRD IN UTAH AND THE FIRST OFF THE WASATCH FRONT.

ST. GEORGE — When Justice Slayton learned that a Black Lives Matter chapter was opening in Southern Utah, she had a hard time wrapping her head around it.

“It boggled me at first,” said the 22-year-old Dixie State University sophomore, Illinois transplant and Black Student Union member. “I was like, ‘Black Lives Matter in St. George? There’s not even black people to advocate for.’”

Less than 1% of St. George’s population is black, but a fifth of the city’s residents identify as something other than white alone, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. And they all deserve a dedicated advocate, said Troy Anderson, the founder of the Southern Utah’s first chapter of Black Lives Matter. Based in Washington County, the group is a full-service civil rights organization dedicated to providing legal aid and support services to people of color in Southern Utah and educational workshops on systemic racism for the broader community. It’s the third chapter to open in Utah and the first off the Wasatch Front.

The decision to open the chapter was not an easy one, said Anderson, a 52-year-old mechanic and youth football coach who moved to St. George from Layton last year. He doubted whether his efforts

would make a meaningful improvement in the lives of people of color in the region. And he was concerned that potential backlash might pose a risk to his family's safety. But after reflecting on his own experiences with police brutality, the choice was clear. "If I'm not going to speak up for my people, who is?" he said. "I don't think I would have been able to live with myself if I didn't take this on."



Over 50 people attended the launch of the Black Lives Matter Southern Utah chapter on Saturday. The event was held at Dixie State University, with support from the university's Applied Sociology program and the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah.
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Black Lives Matter Southern Utah will not be exclusively focused on police brutality, however, Anderson said. Another key goal is to create a space where people of color can feel free to relax and be themselves.

But he also acknowledged that some Southern Utah residents may have a negative view of the national Black Lives Matter movement and encouraged them to keep an open mind about his chapter.

"Ask yourself: why does Black Lives Matter need to be in our community?" he said. "There are things going on that aren't being talked about."

Though the Southern Utah chapter is connected to the the civil rights movement set off by the fatal 2014 shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, Anderson made clear that his group will operate independently of any national leadership. The same is true of the other Black Lives Matter chapters in Utah, with which he expects to collaborate closely.

Lex Scott is one of those collaborators. She founded Black Lives Matter Utah, a chapter covering Salt Lake City and Utah County.

Scott spoke to the reasons why she sees a need for the group in this part of the state at a kick-off event for the Southern Utah chapter on Saturday.

“When you have fewer people of color, their rights tend to get infringed upon more often, so there’s a stronger need for representation,” she said. “I’ve never seen a place that needs a Black Lives Matter chapter more than Southern Utah.”

In the roughly 50-person crowd were people whose family members faced police violence firsthand. Among those were Chandra and Verdell Bell who traveled from Mesquite, Nevada, to attend Saturday’s event. Their son Jamal Bell survived being shot 11 times in his apartment by police officers in Weber County earlier this year.

Marlee Kanosh, a member of the Paiute Indian Tribe of Utah, made the hour-long drive from Cedar City to show her support. After the event, she commented on the connections she sees between police brutality in her community and the Black community across the state. Both Kanosh’s brother and cousin were killed by police officers in Utah. She maintains the Facebook page “Native Lives Taken by Police.”

“I just want to be here to be an ally to them and see what I can help with them with, since I know a little bit — a lot — about police violence and police murders,” she said.

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