

Panel addresses racism in Utah while protesters gather downtown for 11th rally in 12 days

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Saida Dahir and her three sisters were all dressed up in big puffy gowns and on their way to a school dance when police lights flashed behind them.

When they pulled over, the Salt Lake City officer ordered the girls — all black — out of the car, Dahir said. She was 14 years old and terrified.

Her older sister tried to explain that they hadn't done anything wrong, but the man told them to line up against a wall and be quiet. Four more police cars pulled up behind them and those officers started ripping out everything in the Dahirs' little sedan, searching under the seats and in the trunk. After an hour of finding nothing and without an apology, they told the girls they could leave for the prom. They said that a similar-looking car had been involved in a robbery.

"They assumed it was us because of the color of our skin," said Dahir, a refugee born in Somalia. "Being black, it doesn't matter that I'm a refugee or African. A cop just sees that I'm black."

Dahir recounted that experience Wednesday night as part of an online discussion hosted by The Salt Lake Tribune on racism. And each of the panelists also shared their own experiences with discrimination in Utah, especially at the hands of police.

The state, they said, is not immune to the same targeting and violence by law enforcement that has recently incited nationwide rallies. Those have come in response to the death of George Floyd, a black man who was killed last month after a white Minneapolis police officer knelt on his neck for nearly nine minutes.

"This has been brewing under the surface for a long time," said William Smith, a professor of ethnic studies at the University of Utah. "People are tired. People are fed up."

While they spoke, Utah activists gathered for their 11th night of demonstrations downtown. About 300 people marched from the steps of the Capitol down to Washington Square Park, yelling "Black lives matter" and carrying signs that urged, "Defund the police."

Here, in addition to Floyd, they've rallied for Bernardo Palacios-Carbajal, who was shot by Salt Lake City officers at least 20 times last month. Palacios-Carbajal's funeral was Wednesday, and many came to the protest directly from the cemetery. They knelt at the intersection of 400 South and 200 East in a moment of silence for him.

A talk about racism

During the discussion on TribTalk, the panelists said it's been encouraging to see so many Utahns join the movement. Dahir noted that she's been at almost every protest herself.

"The people we're fighting for, the people behind the hashtags could be us any day," she said.

Dahir, a prominent Salt Lake City poet and current student at the University of California at Berkeley, said growing up in Utah there have been police at every school she went to — but she didn't always have access to nurses or counselors. She believes the priorities need to shift along with the money.

Smith agreed, saying he encountered discrimination by police just days into when he arrived in Utah. He could have used support and resources instead.

He came to the state in 1999 to teach at the U. He was driving downtown one day when, he said, police tried to stop him from making a turn and stared him down in his car like he shouldn't be here.

A short time later, he was driving his friend, a white woman, home from lunch when officers started tailing him. When he stopped at her place, the police got out of their car and started walking toward his with a hand on their guns, he said.

"I thought I was going to get a bullet in my head," Smith added.

Smith recalled that they asked his friend if she was all right several times, while she explained that Smith was just dropping her off. Then, the officers said they would have to write him up for parking too far from the curb.

"It was a bogus stop and it was harassment," he recalled.

The professor pointed to studies that have confirmed black people are more likely to be stopped by police and more likely to be frisked by them. Additionally, he said, all people of color have experienced microaggressions and been "treated with indignity" by officers — and society as a whole. It's built into the structures and the institutions.

Black men and women are overlooked for jobs. They're treated as less intelligent. They're blocked from certain apartment buildings.

James Jackson, founder and executive director of the Utah Black Chamber, said awareness of those issues may be at the forefront for the nation now, but it's nothing new. If there's going to be change now, though, he said, those in positions of power and privilege must finally listen.

Otherwise, Smith inserted, "I think it could get a lot worse."

Jackson added: "Black folks are not OK right now. It's time for our voices to be heard before the lid gets blown off again."

He stressed, too, that people must listen to understand — not listen to respond.

There have been almost two weeks of protests — many of which saw brief flashes of violence at the beginning. Both Jackson and Dahir said that's what happens after years of being ignored.

Dahir said the relationship with police has been broken for 50 years, but it was never really good to begin with. Now, she suggested, is the time to tear it down and reinvent what it could be or if it even needs to exist at all.

John Mejía, legal director at the ACLU of Utah, said, too, “I think it’s a time for big ideas because the problems are certainly very big.”

The protests on Wednesday carried into the night — as they have for 11 of the past 12 days in Salt Lake City. But they also started early in the morning this time, too.

At 6 a.m., members of the state’s Black Lives Matter chapter gathered in front of Salt Lake City Hall, along with representatives from the Native American and Latino communities. Just as the sun rose, they shouted, “No justice. No peace.”

State Rep. Sandra Hollins — the only black member of the Utah Legislature — pulled down her face mask and talked about how “justice and peace for all” hasn’t really been for all in the United States. “We have come a long way since the days of segregation, but we still have work to do,” she said.

She paused. “We know sometimes that progress is met with pushback.”

Hollins was joined by a long list of speakers, who talked for more than two hours.

Josianne Petit, a black woman who has organized the group Mama and Papa Panthers, based on the Black Panther movement, spoke about how Salt Lake City isn’t different from Minneapolis. That shootings and killings and discrimination and racism happen here, too.

“Stop apologizing,” she said. “Stop asking for permission. Stop acting like this isn’t a problem in Utah.”

About 12 hours after that started, a second group of protesters returned to the same spot and marched up to the Capitol. They met on the streets with yet another group that’d been up at the Capitol grounds. They called for more transparency and more respect. “Whose streets?” they shouted. “Our streets.”

Nacom Koffi led some of those chants, focusing on Palacios-Carbajal’s death in Salt Lake last month. Palacios-Carbajal was killed after police responding to a call of a gun threat chased the Salt Lake City man for several blocks when he ran from a motel as they approached.

Video from the police body cameras shows Palacios-Carbajal stumble and fall several times before getting up and continuing to run from the officers. After he falls a third time, he picks up something from the ground — police say it was a gun — and officers fired, shooting at him from behind at least 20 times.

“This young man was taken away from his mother,” Koffi said as people in the crowd wiped away tears.

Koffi said the protests have been tiring but not more so than the longstanding racism, of cops pulling over black people without cause — even when they’re just driving to a school dance.

—Tribune reporters Sara Weber and Bethany Rodgers contributed to this report.

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