

Black Lives Matter Utah founder talks racism, police brutality and what needs to happen next

Regarding police shootings: 'Every time it's been a month I just start getting anxiety because I know my phone's going to ring and it's going to be another mom. And I just can't do it anymore. I can't get these phone calls anymore'

By [the Deseret News Editorial Board](#)

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Lex Scott speaks at a Utah Against Police Brutality rally outside the Salt Lake City Public Safety Building on Saturday, July 9, 2016. *Spenser Heaps, Deseret News*

SALT LAKE CITY — Lex Scott is the founder of the Utah chapter of Black Lives Matter. She was born in Denver, Colorado, but moved with her family to Holladay when she was a year old. She went to local schools, graduated from Olympus High School, “and then since attended Weber State University, Utah State University, Charleston Southern University, University of Colorado at Denver and then ended at the University of Utah,” she said.

She appeared before the editorial boards of the Deseret News and KSL Monday to offer her perspective on Black Lives Matter, racism, the media and how she can't bear to receive another call from a mother who has lost a child to police abuse. The conversation has been edited for clarity and length.

Deseret News editorial board: *Our goal today, really, is to listen to you. We really want to hear what you have to say, to educate us, to criticize us, if you wish. But to help see if we can move forward and help the Deseret News, help our readership, help be a part of the conversation for solutions.*

Lex Scott: I started in this movement six years ago after I watched Eric Garner be choked to death on film, and I started an organization called the United Front Civil Rights Organization. That is a national civil rights organization. People kept asking me to start a Black Lives Matter chapter. And so I would hold little Black Lives Matter meetings starting in 2014. No one would show up. We did our official chapter launch three years ago and have been going forward ever since.

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The first year was the hardest year. But since we've been started, we hold a summer camp for Black children. Every year, we rent out 20 acres of land in Logan, Utah, with heated showers, bathrooms, lakes with boats, cabins for the kids, a gymnasium for the kids. We teach them STEM activities, karate, know your rights when dealing with police. This will be our third year holding summer camp. We also hold a ski camp for kids, for Black kids, to learn how to ski at Snowbird. We bought a school bus to turn into a mobile Black History Museum to take back and forth to schools. Now, in the past two weeks, people have flooded the chapter with thousands upon thousands of dollars, so we actually can finish our Black History Museum now.

We hold "Know Your Rights" trainings. We go into the elementary schools, junior highs and high schools and we teach them about the Black Lives Matter movement. ... We do cop watches. We have met with the Salt Lake Police Department every two weeks for the past three years on police accountability and transparency. We meet with the chief of police, the deputy chief of police and the Salt Lake mayor's office. This began during Jackie Biskupski's tenure. We also meet with the FBI civil rights division. I graduated from the FBI Citizens Academy and was invited to Quantico near Washington, D.C., last summer, and FBI headquarters.

We registered inmates to vote in three jails. And we also do a lot of canvassing for and against candidates. And then, of course, we protest. We use protest as a tool and as a last resort. You've seen two protests from us in the past month. The rest of those protests were not hosted by us, had nothing to do with us. And that's a whole other story. But that's basically who we are as a chapter.

DN: *You're not affiliated with the national Black Lives Matter group. Is that correct?*

LS: Correct.

DN: *Could you describe the difference and why you're not affiliated with them? Are your goals different from theirs?*

LS: There are a few schools of thought on this, and I always ask people to look up DeRay Mckesson, Shaun King, Brittany Packnett and Darren Seals. The people I just mentioned are leaders of the Black Lives Matter protests in Ferguson, Missouri. I also protested in Ferguson, Missouri, twice. There are different ideologies about Black Lives Matter. We believe it is a movement and not an organization. People always come up to me and say, "Are you an official chapter of Black Lives Matter?" And I say, "Would you go up to Martin Luther King and say, 'Are you an official chapter of the civil rights movement?'" We believe it is a movement and not an organization. We believe that the national network does a lot of good, and there are a lot of really great activists in the national network. I started this chapter independently because we needed a chapter, so I started an independent chapter. There are hundreds of independent chapters across the nation.



Lex Scott, founder of Black Lives Matter Utah, speaks at a rally at the Woods Cross Police Department on Friday, June 14, 2019. Black Lives Matter Utah was the primary organizer of the event in support of DJ Hrubes, a 10-year-old Black child who family members say had a gun pointed at him by a Woods Cross police officer while he was playing in his grandmother's front yard. *Deseret News archives*

DN: *Can you tell us your top goals with Black Lives Matter? How would you characterize what you're trying to achieve?*

LS: I look at us as a full service civil rights organization. I spend the majority of my day answering civil rights complaints about schools, about prisoners and prisons, inmates in jails, tenants who've been evicted. And so I consider us a full service civil rights organization. Our No. 1 goal right now: I wrote a police reform bill, and it's called the Police Accountability and Transparency Act. And, you know, (Sen.) Mitt Romney called me about police reform. (Rep.) Ben McAdams, (Reps.) Sandra Hollins, Angela Romero, Karen Kwan. All of these legislators from across the nation have been calling me every day about police reform.

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We created a petition called the "We Want Police Reform Petition." We have a million signatures. We are in the top 25 petitions on change.org right now for police reform. And then we saw the Justice and Policing Act, a bill that is being put forward by Nancy Pelosi. After reading this bill, it just brought me to tears. I can't express to you how bad I want this bill. ... It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my entire life. If there is one goal of this chapter right now, it is to get the Justice in Policing Act passed.

DN: *You said you've had an influx of donations. Were you able to fund reasonably well previously? How has that evolved?*

LS: I don't like money, and I have never allowed people to donate to the chapter. And in the past two weeks, these white organizations keep calling and saying, "Hey, we held a fundraiser for you." One girl held a fundraiser for us without our permission, and she said, "Please help me. All these people donated all this money and they need it to go through a 501(c)(3)." So we contacted the Domino Foundation.

They are a 501(c)(3). And I said, “Can you accept these donations on our behalf?” And they said yes. So we put a link to them on our website. And last time I checked with the Domino Foundation and how much money was donated, I almost had a heart attack and died.

I feel like money corrupts, absolutely. I feel like registering people to vote is free. Protesting is free. Calling campaigns are free. Voting is free. And we’ve made it for three years being the most impoverished civil rights organization in Utah. And that’s how I’d like to keep it.

DN: *If people are trying to help you in the movement to educate the audience that you want to reach, why can’t you have some affiliation with another group that’s a 501(c)(3), that you could use them as your conduit to ensure integrity in the use of the funds that are being donated?*

LS: You’re absolutely right. However, when money gets involved, things get a little ugly. And I have a theory, I’ve said this for six years. If you started the movement in a three-bedroom house, you better leave the movement in a three-bedroom house. People are already complaining about what we were spending the money on. I am going to spend the majority of it on the Black History Museum. ... I need to think about it. It came at us so fast.

DN: *Tell us a little bit about how you’re feeling right now. What should we know? Help us understand your perspective and what should be happening right now.*

LS: Well, it’s very overwhelming. For six years, we were ignored. I had doors slammed in my face. I was told I was too controversial. People didn’t want to hear what we said. And we held protests that had three people. You know, if 40 people showed up for a protest, I would call that a successful protest. And then a few weeks ago, I held the protest at six in the morning, where 2,000 people show up, and then my phone is ringing off the hook. I don’t want to cry on this call, but I’m going to.

Just last summer, I sent handwritten letters to every Black celebrity in the country — Beyonce, all these people — because I wanted them to come speak to our kids at camp. And no one replied back. I wanted someone famous. And then now, famous people are calling us saying, “Can we speak at your camp?” And, you know, it’s just really overwhelming. Like all this. It’s really overwhelming that the world cares. You don’t even know how to act, because everybody ignored us for so long.

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We also know they will go away. We know that the crowds will go away. We know the people will go away. We know the headlines will go away. But how do I feel about it? I feel like we have this small moment to change the world and get police reform. And if we don’t get police reform right now, this whole thing is going to happen again in six years. And the only reason we’re here is for Patrick Harmon, who was killed by Utah police. And Elijah Smith, who was killed by Utah police. And Diamonte Riviere, who was killed by Utah police. And Cindrea Europe who was killed by Utah police. And Darrien Hunt, and the list goes on and on. And we’re not here for the summer camp and all the fun stuff we do — we also rented it out theaters for “Black Panther,” you know, we have a lot of fun in the chapter — but we’re here for one reason, and that is to stop police brutality.



Lex Scott, right, speaks during a rally demanding justice in the officer-involved shooting death of Patrick Harmon in August at the Public Safety Building in Salt Lake City on Saturday, Sept. 30, 2017. *Deseret News archives*

DN: *Some of the materials you have produced include this: "Hey white people read this!" Can you elaborate, tell white people what they need to know about racism and Black Lives Matter?*

LS: Hey, white people, listen up. I am half white. My husband is white. My son, he came out white. It was crazy. I was staring at him for like 10 minutes because, I don't know what I thought was going to happen, but he came out white with blue eyes. And I just kept looking at him. Like, I couldn't believe it, and then he's still white. And this is the thing: We don't hate white people. We love Black people and we hate police brutality and racism. And what white people need to understand is that they don't have the same experiences as us.

In Utah, every time we bring up Black Lives Matter, we bring up racism, they say the following statements: "I'm not racist. I have a Black friend." "I'm not racist, my best friend is Black." "I'm not racist, my aunt adopted Black kids" or "I dated someone Black in high school." Or they say, "I'm not racist, I don't see color." These are common things in Utah. Or, "We all bleed red." "We're all one race, the human race." These are really problematic statements. We need for you to see our color. My color is beautiful. White people go tanning to have this color. I need you to appreciate that I'm Black. I need you to see that I'm Black. And I need you to understand there is nothing wrong with being Black. That's step one.

Also, having a Black friend does not make you incapable of committing a racially insensitive act. Having a Black spouse doesn't make you incapable of committing a racially insensitive act. Having a Black best friend doesn't mean you didn't just do something racist to me. I need white people to understand that you can't make statements like, "We're all one race, the human race," because not all races are profiled by police because of the color of their skin. Not all races are denied housing because of the color of their skin. Not all races are denied loans because of the color of their skin. We have a different experience.

Even though it's not the fault of all white people who are alive right now that slavery occurred, all white people benefit from the effects of slavery to this day, just as Black people suffer because of the effects of slavery to this day. And the only way that we overcome this is to have uncomfortable conversations about race and ask hard questions and realize that we all are capable of racial insensitivity, including myself and including my white husband.

Every white person that's coming to the table right now needs to understand that this is a Black-run movement. Black people are capable of running our own movements. We don't need to be saved. We don't need white saviors. We need for white people to dismantle the systems that continue to oppress Black and brown people to this day.

DN: *This past week, we had Democrats in the Senate and Republicans in the House both saying no. What is your message to the national leaders in terms of putting the politics of it all aside and actually getting to the real reform?*

LS: Everything that's in my bill is in the Justice and Policing Act. When we're looking at the the politicians in Washington, they're throwing out bills like chokehold bills and no-knock raid bills, etc. What national politicians need to focus on is the independent civilian oversight piece of the legislation. That is the most important piece of the legislation. And that is because, if you are a police officer in Salt Lake City, and you have an officer-involved shooting, West Valley PD comes in and investigates that shooting and finds you innocent. And then a month later, when West Valley PD shoots someone, Salt Lake PD comes in and investigates West Valley PD and finds them innocent. It's a conflict of interest. Police should not be allowed to investigate each other and find themselves innocent.

So, the independent civilian oversight is the most important thing that we need passed. Because we, personally, Black Lives Matter Utah, we believe that if you are a police officer and you are about to pull the trigger, and you realize that you're going to be independently investigated for that and not investigated by your buddy down the street, you're going to be more hesitant to pull the trigger. And then the qualified immunity reform is also a very important part, because families like Dillon Taylor. Dillon Taylor was killed by police. His mother, Gina Thayne, tried to sue Salt Lake police for that, and she's unable to because of qualified immunity. So the only message I have for national legislators is please don't throw out fluff bills. Because I understand that the majority of the American public hasn't studied policing like I have. They are not experts. They don't understand what is going to create change. So when they throw out these bills like, "Hey, you know, we're going to end no-knock raids. We're going to end chokeholds," and the American public is placated by that. No! People are going to die still. I don't want people to die. I want police held accountable for their actions.

DN: *What kind of message do you have for those people who are conflicted — that they want to speak out, they want to have those conversations with their family members or friends, but they're afraid that they'll do something wrong and be publicly or privately shamed?*

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LS: Well, chances are, they're going to be publicly or privately shamed. And their fear shouldn't be, "Hey, someone's going to call me a racist," because I noticed that white people, their biggest fear is being called a racist. They won't even get involved in the conversations. I would encourage them to educate themselves.

DN: *You use that term "white ally." Can you explain that for us?*

LS: A white ally is someone who supports the Black Lives Matter movement. They support it ideologically. And sometimes they support it physically. It's someone who cares about Black and brown lives and wants to help end systemic racism in the country.

DN: *You said earlier that the Black Lives Matter is an ideology and not an organization. We see white people accusing the Black Lives Matter organization of being violent or alleging it is supported by George Soros or that it is — pick the term — Marxist, communist, socialist. How do you respond to people who try to undermine the movement by attacking the organization?*

LS: We get that all the time. And that's why it's hard to have an organization, because I can't speak to their finances. I don't know what they're doing over there. I just know what I do here. And Black Lives Matter Utah has been protesting for six years. We've never had an arrest. I'm going to knock on some wood right now. I myself am the founder. I've never been arrested, knock on wood again. And we've never incited violence. We've never destroyed property. Those are our rules. We do believe in self-defense in our chapter.

I also know it is our personal ideology that when you see buildings burning down, you see cars on fire, we mourn broken bodies, not broken buildings. You can rebuild a building. You can never bring back Darrien Hunt, who was killed by police. You can never bring back Freddie Gray, who was killed by police, Patrick Harmon. And so, you know, we also know Martin Luther King said the riot is the language of the unheard. So when we see these buildings burning, we understand that Black rage is warranted.

However, in our chapter here, I get a lot of flack. We have all these other activists outside of Black Lives Matter saying, "Lex isn't radical enough." I'm not radical enough because I went out and yelled at the protesters not to incite violence. My thing is this: It's not my job to tell other protesters how they want to protest. It's their prerogative how they want to protest. In our chapter, we do it peacefully because we want them to hear our message.

We don't want the headline to say, "Black Lives Matter burns a building." We want the headline to say, "Black Lives Matter affects police reform," you know, or does these things. I don't want the message to be lost, but I also don't want to put down other protesters. If they want to protest that way, they can do what they want.

DN: *You mentioned that you work hard to do things peacefully. It seems that when the violence comes in, even if it's not your particular organization, it tends to suck everybody down into something that is less effective. How do you control that? Or do you?*

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LS: Well, I said this the other day on some show, I said, "I want every person to ask themselves, are they more bothered by watching a building burn, or by watching George Floyd be murdered by police?" I want them to ask themselves this. Because over the years, we've watched Freddie Gray be killed. We watched Eric Garner be killed. We watched Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, the list goes on and on. And we never see outrage from people when they see Black people murdered by police. We only see outrage when cities are burning and stores are being looted. And I'd have to say to them that if they are more bothered by a building being looted than watching a Black man die at in the hands of the police, they are the problem. They really are the problem.

And when people say, "Hey, we don't want to support the movement, because we see someone in another state burning something," you never were going to support the movement. We didn't burn anything here, but we understand their rage. They don't understand what it's like. For six years, I've been doing this, I have never seen justice. I have never tasted justice.

I got a phone call one day. A mom called me on the phone and says, "Lex, the police just killed my son. I called them, they said we can't talk to you about the investigation. They'll call us and tell us when the body is ready. Why won't they talk to us, Lex?" That's why I wrote something called the Police Brutality Victims Handbook. And I said, "They won't talk to you because you're going to sue them because they murdered your son." But why won't they tell us anything?

And then they call me a week later and say, "Sim Gill won't give us the body cam footage. Lex, why won't he give us the footage? What happened to my son?" This is happening to Bryan Valencia's family right now. And then, in a few weeks, (Salt Lake County District Attorney) Sim Gill justifies the shooting against their loved one. They put them on trial. So places like KSL and Deseret News — and this is a beef I have with you, KSL and Deseret News — is that you pull the criminal record of the Black person that was killed by police. You show their mug shot in an attempt to dehumanize them after their death. So the mothers, I want you to know, the mothers of police brutality victims are reading your stories. They

pull up the mug shot of their son, and then they read hundreds and hundreds of comments calling their son or daughter a thug.

And sometimes in your stories, you'll mention their criminal record. In our chapter, we believe it doesn't matter if you have a criminal record a mile long, you deserve to make it to court. If you truly believe in the criminal justice system, you believe that Black people get to make it to court, and the police are not judge, jury and executioner. These Black and brown people are put on trial after their death because you show their mug shot, you pull their criminal record.

And so I would just say to people who are bothered by the violence: We've been here for six years. Never have we ever seen justice. We know police will never be charged with killing our loved ones, and you want us to stay peaceful when we try to go through the court system. It takes everything in me to keep this chapter peaceful. And you saw me go out there in the streets and tell them not to incite violence.

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I did that. And still I am yelled at in grocery stores, told that that Black Lives Matter is violent. I have white supremacists calling my phone, threatening my life and threatening my family's life. So that's my answer to that, is what do you tell people who are mad at the violence? Tell them to get more mad at violence against Black and brown people. ...

DN: *You've been meeting with (Salt Lake City Police Chief) Mike Brown, and you've been doing that for three years every couple of weeks. Has that yielded anything positive in your mind? Have you been able to effect change in Salt Lake City?*

LS: Yes, we have. The first thing we asked for was a complaint button on the website, so now there's a complaint button on the website. We actually asked them to redo the entire website, and if you go to waybackmachine.com it'll show you the website before we started working with them and the website now.

We asked for de-escalation training; they now have three types of de-escalation training. Heidi Keilbaugh, the wife of James Barker, who was killed by police, attends our meetings, and she asked them to implement Arbinger training, so now they have three types of training and they have Arbinger training as well.

They also removed 70 lethal weapons from their police cars last year and replaced them with less-than-lethal weapons. We protested with Utah Against Police Brutality to get a body cam policy that says all body cam footage has to be released within 10 days of every officer-involved shooting, unedited with sound. And so now if you're shot by police in Salt Lake, all that footage has to be released within 10 days. But if you step outside the boundaries, they'll never give it to you. Sim Gill will never give you your footage.

DN: *You mentioned the children camps and your involvement in the community, but that your main goal of the movement has always been to stop police brutality. Does it have to be either-or? Why can't it be either-and?*

LS: Well, it is either-and because we, currently as we speak right now, in my email, we're having negotiations with Snowbird to take all the camp kids up to Snowbird this weekend, right?

It can be both things. However, sometimes you lose your path, you lose your focus. And I mean, the whole goal is to stop the police from killing people. That's it. That's why we're here. I get anxiety right now because it's been like a month since the police have killed somebody. And every time it's been a month I just start getting anxiety because I know my phone's going to ring and it's going to be another mom. And I just can't do it anymore. I can't get these phone calls anymore. You know, because what if it's camp kid one day? We have to stop the police from murdering us now, and it's so frustrating that I've been doing this for six years. And yeah, we've done little things here and there. But we have accomplished nothing. I've been working on police reform for six years; I have accomplished nothing.

DN: *But that's not true. That's not true at all. As hard as you work, you are making incremental steps. This is a giant ship you're trying to turn around, and it's institutional. ... And you're still on that path.*

LS: I have a team! I do have a team now. You wouldn't believe how many people are behind the scenes. There's so many people. Today, probably 20 people working for the chapter have have messaged me. It's not just me. I know it looks like it's just me, but it's not just me.

DN: *How many people are part of the chapter?*

LS: Who knows? If you asked two weeks ago, we had 200 members. Who knows how many members we have now?

DN: *What's the one message you can give to us or that you want to leave with the community?*

LS: I want the community to think about what their circle of influence is. Every person has a circle of influence. If you're a teacher, you're affecting kids. If you're a doctor, you affect your patients. If you're an artist, you affect your audience. Every person needs to figure out what their circle of influence is and affect that circle and have hard talks about race with that circle and to look deep inside of themselves and and not be triggered and not show white fragility.

Just think, OK, these are ways I can improve my race relations and my racial sensitivity in the conversation.