American Friends Service Committee

Quaker values in action

South Star

Newsletter of the South Region, American Friends Service Committee • Spring 2015

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."
— MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

SOAR TAKES FLIGHT

YOUTH PROTEST POLICE VIOLENCE ACROSS REGION

Youth march in Greensboro, NC. Photo by Lori Fernald Khamala

Farajii Muhammad, Baltimore's Youth Empowerment director

In January, AFSC staff and youth from across the South Region led protests and a national panel discussion to confront the issue of police violence and militarization in the United States.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday served as the launch date for SOAR (South Organizing Against Racism), which inspired youth-led events in over 15 cities including Baltimore, Washington, D.C., Greensboro, Miami and New Orleans.

AFSC programs, which address a wide range of issues from immigration reform to health care policy to human rights education, united to make a statement with the help of the powerful force that ties them together: our nation's youth.

"It was a major take away for me," declared Alyzza May, a member of the Greensboro Mural Project and USA Cooperative Youth Council. "Being part of the pseudo panel was great ... There were a lot of points of entry for folks in different ways, since we all learn/engage/process in different ways."

Toni Etheridge, NC Peace & Economic Justice program associate, agrees with SOAR's emphasis on lifting up youth voices. "The movement is about learning from our historical path. Then pass on the knowledge to our young people and trust their leadership."

"Our presence in the state capital of Annapolis served as the catalyst which further ... activated victims of police brutality and their familes; students, church members and others to take a stand," claimed Baltimore Youth Empowerment program director Farajii Muhammad. "The energy, the spirit, all that we saw and experienced on that day showed that SOAR was right on time with this idea—but most importantly, that the peace and justice work of AFSC is highly valuable, and greatly needed."

SOAR coverage continues on page 3

A MESSAGE FROM THE REGIONAL DIRECTOR

Dear Family, Friends and Supporters,

On January 15th, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday, AFSC South Region youth programs participated in SOAR (South Organizing Against Racism), a day of action against police violence and militarization.

Over 15 cities participated by publically demonstrating and conducting workshops on this important issue. In this ongoing moment of youth activism, we fully support young people and others in pressing the case against police violence and militarization.

SOAR's first day of action not only captured the spirit of the moment but also offered valuable conversations and strategies for how to move this work forward. For our youth programming, this day offered an opportunity to build relationships and become better community organizers.

Looking forward, we as a region will continue to support our programs that are working to engage the larger structures that hold power over our lives.

— KAMAU FRANKLIN

South regional director Kamau Franklin (right) with South Exceutive Committee clerk Nikki Vangsnes

American Friends Service Committee

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The SOAR Baltimore town hall meeting on police violence and militarization is now available in full on YouTube via TheRealNews.

Please visit www.afsc.org for more information about SOAR and for extended articles about the South Region

Right: SOAR youth led a march to the state capitol building in Annapolis, MD, where organizers made statements to state officials and press. Far right: Eddie Conway, activist and former Black Panther Party member, during a town hall meeting on police violence and militarization hosted by The Real News in Baltimore, MD.

Photo by Jean-Louis Peta Ikambana

Left: In Washington, D.C., youth involved with AFSC's DC Peace & Economic Justice Project spoke about police violence and systemic racism through the lens of human rights.

Youth ambassadors at M.O.M.I.E.S. (Mentoring of Minorities in the Education System), a nonprofit organization developing youth leadership skills in the D.C. area, worked to introduce participants to human rights as a framework for defining, analyzing and taking action against the issues of violence and injustice in their communities.

Seeing that there was a fundamental problem with the actions of police brutality and the various human rights it violated, this group of youth ambassadors took a charge to help stop it. **- JENADEE NANINI & WALTER HAWES, AFSC HUMAN RIGHTS LEARNING INTERNS**

Right: Events in Greensboro, NC included a march and rally, a national livestream panel and a local community-building discussion.

The discussion, which was held at the University of North Carolina -Greensboro in collaboration with the Women's & Gender Studies Department, as well as a host of other community partners, targeted the issue of police brutality, but also examined the interconnectedness of this issue to reproductive rights, economic justice, LGBTQ rights, immigrants' rights, and the movement for justice in Palestine.

Photo by Lori Fernald Khamala

What connected supporters on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday was the commitment to eradicating the systems of injustice that disenfranchise so many of people and their loved ones.

- HOLDEN CESSION, AFSC INTERN

Photo by Dee Dee Green

Left: On the campus of Dillard University in New Orleans, one of three historically Black universities in the city, 50 students and community members gathered to watch AFSC's live broadcast of a national panel discussion on police violence.

Following the broadcast and a video montage portraying police brutality all over the country, a lively discussion ensued with moderator Dee-1 and a panel including representatives from the Independent Police Monitor's Office, the Voice of the Ex-Offender (VOTE) and Dillard's student body presented Know Your Rights information and encouraged participants to take certain precautions when interacting with police. **- DEE DEE GREEN, NEW ORLEANS AREA PROGRAM DIRECTOR**

Right: In collaboration with members of multiple organizations including E.R.A. and Dream Defenders, AFSC supporters gathered to challenge the Homestead, FL local Mayor Jeff Porter to stand with immigrant communities and come out publicly against the Department of Homeland Secutrity's Priorities Enforcement Program.

American Friends Immigrant Services also gathered in Fort Lauderdale to raise awareness for SOAR, and participated in the national panel discussion that brought so many different groups together on the issue of police violence and militarization.

- PAUL-ANDRE MONDESIR
AFIS HAITIAN COMMUNITY SOCIAL ADVOCATE

MARIE'S STORY

At first, Marie lived a conventional and simple life in her hometown of Cabaret, Haiti. She worked as a farmer and growing up, she claims that there were more thriving businesses than there are today. Her brother and her father owned a small store in the city. There was not much that Marie needed because as far as she was concerned, she lived a sustainable life.

However, life dealt Marie and her family a bad hand of cards. The Duvalier "Baby Doc" regime implemented a reign of terror during the 1980s. In order to crush popular uprisings occurring throughout the country, the paramilitary harmed the lives of many Haitian civilians. Unfortunately, Marie's brother's store in the city was destroyed by the paramilitary and burnt to the ground. Shortly thereafter, Marie's father passed away, and her brother fled to Paris. After all the chaos, Marie concluded that it was dangerous for her to stay in Haiti. She had no option except to migrate to the United States.

After living in Panama, Mexico, eventually obtaining her U.S. citizenship in Texas and then moving to Florida, Marie felt like she could conquer any problem in her path. She also felt an urge to become an American citizen and secure her permanent status in the United States.

Marie heard about the American Friends Service Committee's citizenship program from her friends, who raved about the effectiveness of AFSC's classes run by Paul-Andre Montesir. Sure enough, after attending Paul's classes, Marie quickly agreed with them. She claims that Paul is a nice teacher that is passionate for people of all shapes and size. Although many people told Marie that she was incapable of passing the exam, Paul always insisted on her success. Marie became skilled at multi-tasking, often listening to the citizenship questions on CD while she worked. Through persistence, Marie thanks Jesus that she passed the test and became a naturalized US citizen.

Now, Marie feels that she has an immense sense of power and opportunity, and even looks forward to voting in the upcoming elections. Marie retains a deep sense of pride for Haiti and defines herself as Haitian-American. She hopes to petition for her family that remains in Haiti to come to the United States.

- STORY AND PHOTO BY AFIS INTERN GRACE SLAWSKI (FULL ARTICLE ONLINE AT AFSC.ORG)

HOW TO BE HUMAN: D.C. YOUTH LEADING YOUTH

"Starting this human rights program has shown us how to be better human beings for ourselves and the world around us" claims Mika, a M.O.M.I.E.S. (Mentoring Minorities in the Education System) youth ambassador and 8th grader at Howard University Middle School in Washington, D.C. Throughout the year, M.O.M.I.E.S. ambassadors in D.C. have learned about their human rights and started advocating for social change. Last semester, the ambassadors advocated for an end to police brutality through three methods of advocacy: 1) educating the public, 2) protesting police brutality and urging collaboration between the community and the police, and 3) expressing their feelings through artistic forms such as rap, poetry, and painting.

Photo by Jean-Louis Peta Ikambana

This semester, the youth ambassadors selected human trafficking as the human rights issue they would focus on. Participants chose to write and propose laws to their local council members that would work towards progress in the D.C. area. In addition, they will continue to educate the public through media and local petition drives as well as create and implement a rehabilitation program at M.O.M.I.E.S., both for the victims and their relatives to help in their healing process and reintegration back into society.

"It was really surprising to learn the statistics around human trafficking. It is one thing to know it is a problem, but facing these facts and numbers let us see how big it is in reality," explained the group.

Human rights give advocates and victims alike the ability to express themselves and feelings about problems in their communities. This is a language that doesn't know race or religion, ethnicity or nationality. Human rights give you voice simply for being human. "As a human being, you have the right to your own opinion, but you must respect others and their right to have theirs," said Zari Prather. "Learning about human rights taught me that."

- WRITTEN BY THE YOUTH AMBASSADORS AT M.O.M.I.E.S. AND DC HUMAN RIGHTS LEARNING PARTICIPANTS (FULL ARTICLE ONLINE AT AFSC.ORG)

Homeowner Michele Swan with Senator Vincent Fort (D-GA). Photo by Tim Franzen

COURAGE IN THE FACE OF ATLANTA EVICTION NIGHTMARE

In January 2015, long-time Ellenwood, GA resident Michele Swan, with the support of her neighbors and Occupy Our Homes Atlanta, publically reclaimed her home. Evicted over the holidays by WRI Group, a subsidiary of American Residential Leasing Co., Michele has been locked in a battle with WRI Group to claim the house that has rightfully belonged to her since 2003. Michele won her home in a divorce settlement years ago, and WRI has refused to recognize her as the owner since her name isn't on the original loan. As a result, WRI has refused to communicate with her or accept any payment for the house.

Michele is ready, willing, and able to hold a mortgage and make payments on her home. Her only request is that she and her children are able to remain in the home they have been investing in for years. Senator Vincent Fort (D-GA) joined Michele to voice his concern over the situation and the manner in which Michele and her family have been treated, speaking, "We are calling on WRI to do the right thing: sit down at the table and reason together … we want to send a message to WRI, this is a new year and new day. We are not going to let this family be put out—we are going to stand with [them] for as long as it takes."

After Michele and Occupy Our Homes Atlanta continued efforts to enter into dialogue with WRI and ARL to no avail, they took the issue directly to WRI. American Friends Service Committee joined Michele and Occupy Our Homes Atlanta at WRI's office to send a clear message that Michele will no longer be ignored, and that her community is standing beside her.

Finally, after Michele and her supporters were ordered by the Henry County Police to vacate her property, Michele was arrested, denied bond and charged with criminal trespassing. This sets a dangerous precedent for nonviolent housing justice protesters, who have exhausted every line of communication with the involved parties in an effort to peacefully resolve the situation.

For more information, please visit Michele's online petition. AFSC continues to work for justice for Michele and her family.

NEW ORLEANS PEACE BY PIECE: HEALING THROUGH THE ARTS

Photo by Akema Namore

The McKenna Museum of African American Art in New Orleans was the setting for the 2015 Designing Our Freedom Event, Healing Through the Arts. This year more than 20 young artists from Dillard University and several high schools and middle schools from around the city participated in the event. Instead of holding AFSC's traditional t-shirt and hoody themed fashion show, New Orleans participants opted to broaden the use of art and let young people express themselves through several modes of creativity.

Commemorating Black history, Peace by Piece presented a showcase of talent demonstrating how young people in New Orleans can and do use art to heal from injustice. Participants, including students who are active in the Peace by Piece in-school and afterschool programs, used costumes, spoken word, song and performance art to tell stories of the school-to-prison pipeline, violence including police brutality and economic injustice.

Dance performances, a hip-hop cypher and a "Tribute to Trayvon" by some young designers were also highlights of February's event. Six students honored the memory of Trayvon Martin by designing hoodies with messages of injustice as well as hope. Trayvon died tragically February 26, 2012 at the hands of George Zimmerman, who was eventually acquitted in 2013. As one designer shared her story of injustice, she recited the names of New Orleans youth whose lives have been cut short as a result of violence.

"Can we do something like this once a month?" asked Simonne Walker, a student at Jefferson Chamber Foundation Academy and first-time participant in this year's show. "Meeting other young people from around the city and coming together like one big family to make this show happen feels really good and I want to do more," she added.

The New Orleans program responded to her excitement by hosting its inaugural bi-monthly Peace by Piece meeting in March. Bringing together and engaging young people who are energized about social justice and want to make a difference in the city inevitably creates alternatives to violence and promotes healing, peace by piece.

- DEE DEE GREEN
NEW ORLEANS AREA PROGRAM DIRECTOR

WEST VIRGINIA ACE YOUTH CONTINUE CAMPAIGN FOR REFORM

Photo by Lida Shepherd

In a tough political year in West Virginia, young people from the Appalachian Center for Equality program rose to the challenge.

In the wake of the 2014 elections, control of the WV legislature passed to Republican hands for the first time since 1932. Many legislators who had championed the statewide Our Children Our Future campaign to end child poverty were either no longer there or were not in leadership positions. Many legislators were newly elected and largely unknown.

Nevertheless, when the campaign unveiled its platform in mid-January at the state Capitol, high school senior and BAPS (Believing All Is Possible) member Chancely Norman was one of the key speakers at the press conference and spoke on the need for juvenile justice reform. Norman was quoted in the Charleston Gazette as saying, "Locking up kids costs a lot of money for our state. I don't think taking kids away from their families and locking them up does much help for anybody. It hurts them instead of giving them the help they need."

Prior to the election, BAPS students helped organize and run a candidate forum to educate lawmakers about their issues. During the session, they held a community meeting on juvenile justice.

BAPS students were also front and center at Kids and Families Day at the legislature, where members spoke and led cheers and explained the day's events to a crowd of over 500 adults and young people.

At West Virginia's first Girls' Day at the Capitol, ACE students from Mingo County not only spoke to a crowd of around two hundred attendees about foster care and juvenile justice, but also were interviewed about the issues on statewide talk radio. During a hearing about drinking water protections late in the session, the statement of a young woman from the Boone County program had her statement read at a public hearing in the House chambers.

In the end, despite the challenging

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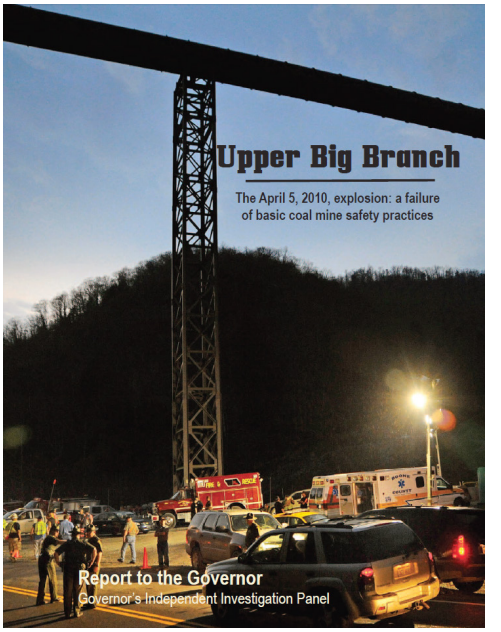
environment, the campaign won several victories, including juvenile justice and truancy reform, some expansion of early childhood education, restored funding for family programs, some drinking water protections, preserving Medicaid expansion, and the creation of a task force to prevent child sexual abuse.

The WV Economic Justice Project was also heavily involved in the legislative session. In addition to supporting the child poverty campaign, the project participated with allies in successful efforts to stop anti-union "right to work" legislation, preserve prevailing wages for public construction projects, limit dark money in political campaigns, and preserve the right of access to courts for workers and their families when they are hurt or killed on the job.

- RICK WILSON, WVEJ PROGRAM DIRECTOR
& LIDA SHEPHERD, WV YOUTH & ECONOMIC JUSTICE DIRECTOR

HONORING BETH SPENCE



(Left) Beth Spence with South regional director Kamau Franklin and (right) the 2010 Upper Big Branch mine disaster independent report co-authored by Spence.

West Virginia Economic Justice Project program coordinator Beth Spence began working for AFSC in WV in 2002, but her connection goes back decades farther. A Logan, WV native and longtime collaborator with the AFSC program there, she did pioneering work on rural homelessness. She also helped the new Economic Justice Project get started in 1989.

Starting in 2006, she focused on coalfield issues. Her work on mine safety and exposing the misdeeds of coal giant Massey Energy had a huge impact. Massey was notorious for union busting, environmental impacts, safety issues, intimidation, and buying political influence.

Spence's report on a 2006 fire which killed two miners helped result in the largest criminal fines levied on a corporation to that point and helped the widows win a legal settlement.

After the Upper Big Branch disaster, which killed 29 miners, Spence again served on Gov. Manchin's investigative team. Her report made nationwide headlines. The ripples continue.

Former CEO Don Blankenship was forced out in 2010. Massey was bought by Alpha Natural Resources in 2011. Alpha had to spend over $200 million to settle liabilities, the largest fine ever assessed for a mine disaster. It also had to invest $48 million in mine safety. Several Massey officials have been convicted.

In November 2014, Blankenship was indicted on multiple federal charges related to UBB. Many items in the 40+ page indictment were documented in Spence's report. The trial is now underway.

Blankenship's indictment was historic. It is the first time that criminal charges of this kind have gone all the way up the corporate chain. According to AFSC WVEJ's Rick Wilson, "We are very proud of Beth's role in this and hope it sends a strong message to all those who play games with the lives of others."

Spence retired at the end of 2014, but the effects of her work will be long-lasting.

American Friends
Service Committee

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BALTIMORE MENTOR CONTINUES RECOVERY

Friend of a Friend office coordinator Russell "Green-Bey" Green (right) with former AFSC intern Demetrius Jones

Russell "Green-Bey" Green, Baltimore's Friend of a Friend office coordinator, continues his recovery after a serious car accident in February 2015.

In the words of ConneXions Community Based Arts School student Brittany Price, Green-Bey is "a big brother, a mentor." His work at ConneXions is always about mentoring and listening to young people. Students and staff can tell when he is in the building by the noise level in the halls—when he is present, the noise level is down, even though he is always engaged in conversation with students. Staff at the school have been touched by his work, and many have sent their wishes for his recovery to Green-Bey's family members and AFSC coworkers.

The AFSC Baltimore office would like to thank its many supporters for their gracious and encouraging words during Green-Bey's rehabilitation.

– DOMINQUE STEVENSON
PROGRAM DIRECTOR
FRIEND OF A FRIEND