

Sitkans Speak for Respect at Silent Vigil



Details

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Hundreds of Sitkans gathered in Totem Square Monday evening for a vigil for George Floyd, an event which included seven minutes of silence followed by Tlingit music.

A crowd of three to four hundred, most wearing face masks and standing apart on the grass, attended the peaceful event on a cool blustery evening.

The crowd stood in silence for seven minutes to honor Floyd's memory. One of the event organizers, Michael Mausbach, said the minutes of silence represented the seven minutes during which Floyd begged for his life before he died with a police officer's knee on his neck.

Floyd's death on May 25 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, set off protests across the nation and in Europe.

Mausbach said "we're out here for the same reason everyone is out in the street down south and around the world right now. It's in memory of George Floyd, but it's also in response to systemic racial injustice."

Eleya Rosenthal, another vigil organizer, carried a sign saying "No Justice, No Peace," which has become a rallying cry of protesters around the country.

She said, "It means that until there is justice in significant and long-lasting, tangible ways, we are not going to rest. And we're going to keep making noise until people pay attention... There is not going to be a quiet acceptance of the status quo."



More than 300 people share seven minutes of silence on Totem Square during a vigil for George Floyd, who died last week while in police custody in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The large turnout for the event made it difficult for participants to maintain the six-foot social distance that organizers had hoped for. (Sentinel Photo by James Poulson)

The silent vigil was followed by traditional Tlingit music. Louise Brady was one of the vocalists for a song about the Tlingit Peace Hat. The song memorialized the fallen Tlingit people who died fighting the Russians in 1804, but also commemorated the subsequent peace between the warring groups in 1821.

"It comes from the Peace Hat that was gifted from (Aleksandr) Baranof in the 1800s," Brady said. "It's about the fort, the Battle of 1804. And it talks about the cannons (of the Russian frigate Neva), hearing the cannons firing into the fort. And it's mourning the losses that we had during the battle, but also celebrating the peace."

The Peace Hat in the song was returned to Sitka in 2003 after years in the collection of a New York museum.

Brady emphasized the need for peace and healing.

"This is really what we need, peace. This is a really difficult time," she said.

The song took place at the foot of the Baranof totem pole, which includes a depiction of the two-headed eagle of imperial Russia, as well as an image of St. George slaying the dragon, the medieval symbol of Moscow.

Brady said that this was significant to her, especially in the context of violent actions both recent and historical.

"We market Sitka as a Russian place, but we have been here for thousands of years before the Russians," she said.

Brady added that, while change can be slow, she hopes for systemic alterations to the justice system.

"So many of our men of color end up either in prison or dead, and so I think it is important to focus on how many deaths we have had and how long has it taken for us to get together like this," she said. "This is our opportunity in Sitka to say that the western justice system does not work."

A number of high school students attended the vigil.

One of them, Kanish Djaker of India, said he was there because "it's one thing to voice your opinions on social media but it's a whole different game when you're in a physical space... It gives you hope that there are still people looking out for change"

On the fringe of the vigil, in front of City Hall, stood a half-dozen counter-protesters with a version of the colonial-era American flag.

There was also a law enforcement presence at the gathering, though officers stayed to the outside of the group.

Police Chief Robert Baty said the peaceful nature of the vigil "totally reinforces my belief in this community."

"We weren't going to have a problem because these are neighbors," he said. "How do you disrespect a neighbor? How do you throw a brick through a neighbor's window?"

Baty recognized some of the historical tensions that have existed in Sitka, adding that he sees the issue of human rights as global.

"It's a bigger picture of the whole country, the whole world, really. We need to respect everyone. And human rights isn't a one-location issue, it's a whole world issue," Baty said.

In other U.S. cities the past week there were protests that led to fires and property damage, and to a police response with tear gas and rubber bullets.

Michael Mausbach said that "violence begets violence. And in terms of policy choice, that is extremely poor policy."

Surveying the crowd before the beginning of the vigil, Mausbach said that "regardless of our living on an island in the North Pacific, we are connected to the rest of the world."