

Demonstrations...from Page 1A

5-year-old shouldn't have to thank anyone for protecting their life.

"This is who and what we are fighting for, and unfortunately, our work is far from over. So please, keep going to (protests) and working to change the hearts and minds of our neighbors in whatever way you can until safety is the default setting for that 5-year-old little boy and for every person of color."

The event was not a college function, though YHC President Dr. Drew Van Horn, who was on campus during the protest, did say that the college had allotted certain spaces for protesters to use that day.

Protesters elicited a range of responses from passing motorists, which were mostly friendly and in support of the cause – honks, waves, thumbs up. A few people, however, yelled things like "all lives matter," "white lives matter, too," and even "the South will rise again."

One of the messages Slavkin and others hoped to get across to people who might not understand their intentions was that "all lives can't matter until black lives matter," and those gathered used their freedom to peaceably assemble to get that message out to the world.

Joining Slavkin were other members of the Young Harris College faculty and staff, as well as several students and alumni. There were also many members of the community present from Young Harris, Blairsville, Murphy and Hiwassee.

Ada Huff of Hiwassee heard about the protest via Facebook, and she decided it was definitely something she wanted to participate in. Huff attended the event with her 13-month-old son Magnus, and it was, not surprisingly, his first protest.

"I'm glad for the community to be supporting Black Lives Matter way up here in Young Harris and Hiwassee," Huff said. "For so long, it felt like it was a big city problem, and it's not – it's everywhere."

Huff said it was important to show solidarity for black Americans in areas like Towns County, where the overwhelming majority of residents are white, as doing so presents a united front against injustices – including police brutality – facing black communities nationwide.

"I've not had a lot of experience with the police here, and I'm sure every place is different, but it's just got to stop," Huff said.

Helping to keep everyone safe was Young Harris College Police Chief Kenneth "Ode" Henderson and his officers, along with deputies from the Towns County Sheriff's Office, a Georgia State Patrolman and Chief Harold Copeland with Fire Rescue.

Homemade "Black Lives Matter" face masks were crafted by organizers for distribution to anyone wanting one, and the two-hour protest ended as peacefully as it began, at about 6 p.m. on Saturday.

In Blairsville, resident Samantha Frost spearheaded the peaceful protest that took place Sunday, June 14, outside the Union County Courthouse. It was a good evening for an outdoor gathering, as an intense rain moved briefly through the area beforehand, ushering in cooler temps and cloud cover.

Frost said the community support apparent in the Murphy protest is what inspired her to team up with others from the "murphy blm peaceful protest" Facebook group to organize



Young Harris College Professor Dr. Mary Slavkin, right, co-organized the solidarity protest, which took place in front of the college but had no formal affiliation.

an event in Blairsville focused on honoring the memories of the dead.

Central to the protest was a large group of "name holders," or protesters holding signs featuring individual names of black Americans killed by police. Following an inclusive prayer, the name holders gathered around the speaking stage to begin a moment of silence.

The moment of silence lasted 8 minutes and 46 seconds, which was the amount of time that Minneapolis Police Officer Derek Chauvin knelt on the neck of George Floyd, resulting in Floyd's death and Chauvin's subsequent arrest for murder.

Floyd's May 25 killing served as the catalyst for the nationwide protests, including the ones that have taken place much closer to home in areas where police brutality is a foreign concept, like in Blairsville and Young Harris.

The law enforcement presence was clearly felt at the Union County protest, with organizers thanking police for being there to keep the peace, including Blairsville Police Chief Michael "Bear" Baxter, who kept watch over the scene with his officers.

Joining Blairsville PD were Union County Sheriff's Office deputies and officers with the local School Police Department, as well as law enforcement from Fannin and Lumpkin counties and the Georgia State Patrol. Roads leading to the protest area were blocked off for safety purposes.

Furthermore, Sheriff Mack Mason was on standby in town in case he was needed, and Enotah Judicial Circuit District Attorney Jeff Langley maintained a presence alongside police that night.

At least 125 people and perhaps more attended the protest, which Frost saw as a testament to the level of local support she was hoping to elicit.

"It's so needed here, just to have a sense of community (around these issues)," Frost said. "So many people have said to me, 'I'm so glad we have found like-minded people now,' because nobody knew they were out there. So, to see this – it's beautiful."

Several speakers took to the mic Sunday to deliver speeches, including 19-year-old Te'Lor Allen of Murphy. Allen spoke of the pain she felt regarding the killings of many black Americans in recent years, including Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice and Breonna Taylor, just to name a few.

Touching on some of the local opposition to Black Lives Matter she has witnessed, Allen said that "we will use our voices to vote, and we will continue this fight until all understand the need for this movement."

"Things will only change when we stand together as a human race and fight against injustices," Allen said. "I will

don't know any better," Murray Tarter said. "If you go to the Black Lives Matter website, when you go to 'About' and then click 'What We Believe,' you'll see that they actually put that in writing that they're against the nuclear family."

"They're against families run by mothers and fathers. They want families to be run by the community. They also say they're against capitalism, and then they've got a lot of other mumbo jumbo. But there's very little mention of black lives in their charter, I guess you want to call it."

"They are basically what we used to call anarchists, so these guys are unknowingly supporting anarchy in the United States right now, and that can't end well."

Fortunately, both the Blairsville and Young Harris protests went according to organizers' plans in staying peaceful, which many demonstrators pointed out was crucial in getting their messages about injustice across.

Several organizers of

scream Black Lives Matter at the top of my lungs for the rest of my life if that's what it takes, and I will march and speak until our voices are heard and understood."

Also attending were Democratic candidates for public office Devin Pandey and Dave Cooper, both military veterans who made sure to speak with potential constituents at the protest.

Pandey is running for Georgia's 9th Congressional District seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, and Cooper is vying to become the next District 8 State Representative in the Georgia General Assembly.

"Dr. Martin Luther King had a dream, and he marched for that dream. And that's why we march – we march to keep the dream alive," Pandey said to the crowd, before promising to pursue a multi-year training requirement for new police officers if elected, as well as to repurpose police budgets for community programs.

"With that money that we would save by defunding the police, the good officers – the ones who actually care about our lives – could get the training and the education that they need to become part of our communities," Pandey said. "That is what we need to stop what is going on today, and that's why we march."

The rest of the event featured a singalong, a closing speech and voter signups, and people were encouraged to mingle and meet one another to fortify their connections in the area, all while wearing facial coverings in the event of COVID-19.

A small group of about two dozen counterprotesters gathered in the public picnic area across the street from the courthouse, holding "All Lives Matter" signs and waving flags for President Donald Trump and Blue Lives Matter.

Counterdemonstrators shouted All Lives Matter during several of the speeches made at the BLM solidarity protest, and a couple of brief arguments broke out between members of the two groups, though everything remained calm for the most part.

Murray and Sandra Tarter of Blairsville attended as counterprotesters, donning pro-life T-shirts, waving an American flag and supporting President Trump. The couple also served as the only counterprotesters across the street from the Black Lives Matter solidarity protest in Young Harris on June 13.

At both protests, they held a sign reading "Socialism Kills" on one side, and "BLM is Anti Family" on the other. Explaining their opposition, the Tartars said they actually agreed with what the local protesters were out doing – they just didn't think the local protesters knew what all they were supporting.

"Most of these people are here for a good reason; they

recent area solidarity protests have said that they plan on holding similar events in the future, so stay tuned to the

various BLM Facebook groups for the area to find out when and where the next one will be.



Many protesters gathered at the Union County Courthouse in Blairsville for a peaceful protest in solidarity with Black Lives Matter Sunday. Photo by Shawn Jarrard