

“Where after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home—so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any map of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person: the neighborhood that he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination.”

- Eleanor Roosevelt in a speech to the United Nations in 1958

“Step by step the longest march can be won, can be won. Many stones can form an arch, singly none, singly none. And by union what we will can be accomplished still. Drops of water turn a mill, singly none, singly none.”

- John McCutcheon



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Did you know?

While the President of the United States and other elected officials have a lot of power to affect change, real social justice happens as a result of the actions of regular people like ourselves who are willing to stand up for the principles upon which this country was founded – the most essential being that all people have equal rights under the law. Social justice movements have included: (among many others):

- The uprising of the colonists against British tyranny;
- The Boston Tea Party;
- Nat Turner's rebellion against slavery;
- The Underground Railroad;
- The Women's Suffrage movement;
- The United Mineworker and other union organizing and strikes;
- The Civil Rights Movement;
- The Black Panthers;
- Vietnam War protests and marches for Peace;
- The Women's March.

These are but a few movements that have changed history and altered the course of policy.

"The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."

Martin Luther King, Jr.



On Friday, January 20, 2017, I traveled with five other Vermonters to Washington D.C. to participate in the January 21, 2017 Women's March. I had no idea what to expect. I did not anticipate that it would be a life-affirming and life-changing event. But it was.

The official march was ultimately cancelled after a series of speakers because there were too many people. But that did not stop the crowd of people we were in. To chants, including "This is what Democracy looks like!" we flowed out of the Mall into the street, a small trickle of water that quickly became a flood, heading we were not sure where, but somewhere. From all directions people flowed in a steady stream down every side street culminating on Pennsylvania Avenue and marching on to the White House.

It is estimated that at least 500,000 people participated in the Washington D.C. march. Somewhere between 15,000 and 20,000 gathered here in the tiny State of Vermont. (See Commissioner Ellis' thoughts on Montpelier on page 3). Worldwide, estimates are that over a million people participated from across the U.S. to Africa to Europe to Australia to Antarctica.

The reasons people participated were many and varied but the overarching, unifying theme, was an affirmation of basic Human Rights and of love, respect, honor and dignity for all people. Individuals were marching to support equal rights for women, reproductive freedom, Black Lives Matter, immigrant rights, LGBTQ rights, climate change, healthcare for all, and for a democracy that is under attack at its most fundamental levels. The demonstrations were peaceful. The message was one of love not hate, hope not despair, progress not backsliding. It was also a message that people are not going to stand by while basic human rights, equality for all and our environment are threatened.

Days later, a series of Executive Orders came down from the White House, One targets so-called "sanctuary cities" for a cut off of federal funding. Another denies entry to individuals from countries with predominantly Muslim populations and stops the entry into the U.S. of Syrian refugees, effectively halting the Rutland refugee resettlement program before it began. Another announces the President's intention to build the wall between the U.S. and Mexico.

On January 29th, Governor Phil Scott issued a statement: "I'm going to do everything I can to protect the rights of all Vermonters and the human rights of all people. That includes standing up to executive orders from Washington that cross legal, ethical, and moral lines that have distinguished America from the rest of the world for generations."

Attorney General, TJ Donovan prior to the release of the executive orders had appointed an Immigration Task Force, (the HRC executive director is a member,) to examine the ways in which states can protect the rights of their residents in the face of federal immigration mandates. He has joined 15 other Democratic attorneys general from other states and the District of Columbia who have pledged "to use the tools of our offices" to fight any orders they consider to be unlawful or unconstitutional and expressing confidence that such executive orders will be struck down by the courts.

Basic human rights are being challenged now in ways that were unimaginable just weeks ago. We must stand together in the face of these challenges to ensure that the promise of America as a beacon of hope and tolerance is not tarnished by actions taken out of fear or hatred.

As many a sign at the rally stated: Love Trumps Hate.

Karen Richards



The Women's March in Montpelier

Thoughts from Commissioner Dawn Ellis:

Riding in from out towards Middlesex, I lock my rusty, trusty bike where the police officially close the road. Forward from here by foot. The people of the march and rally fill streets where there used to be cars, spilling over sidewalks and into parking lots: running off, headed towards the river. A new January thaw to behold. Friends and strangers smile open-faced welcomes. Children boast the best seat in the house, atop their parents' shoulders. I spin 180 degrees in the crowd to take the people in. To my left, I find families bundled up, swathed children rolling like pumpkins. A step away, a field of women, and men, and transgender marchers, radiating pink knit hats with explicit explanations on placards held tightly to the chest. Rainbow signs and banners sprinkle an array of color in the sea of fuchsia. People using wheelchairs navigate the crowd with friends trailing or pushing behind them, seeking together in good spirits that sweet spot, where sight and hearing reveal the ringing voices of the speakers. Hardly a hint of cold, energized attitudes warmed the crowd... along with sizzling, slapping, serving up specials of the local food vendors.

Generations of women (and men) stepped to the podium, from former Gov. Madeleine Kunin to Rep. Kiah Morris to Greta, a high schooler and poet asserting her right to mourn and fight back. Each unwrapped pieces of their personal stories to call us to action. Push back against hate. Together we're better. Use our voices, presence, and involvement to counter exclusionary rhetoric and policies broiling in Washington. A crowd roar erupts as surprise speaker Senator Bernie Sanders speaks of resistance and the power of coming together.

The March in Montpelier represents a moment of coalition, as people stand together, not just for women, but for all manner of people experiencing exclusion. The marchers stand for science, for the planet, for access and inclusion. They shout for LGBTQA rights, for black lives, so immigrants, migrant workers and non-citizen residents can live here with no fear. They protest for little girls learning to believe and older women who have seen it all before and will have none of it this time.

We stand for human rights. We sing and celebrate. Here, a woman balances herself on her hands in a straddle defying gravity as a man holds her Nasty Woman sign. There, a drum group leads the pulse for chant, for dance. I put down my bag and join the hip shaking, hand waving, feet drumming with friends-in-the-making. Winding through the crowd, I catch conversations with old friends and new. I find fellow parents looking to tomorrow, directors of a local theatre pledging to provide safe haven in their space, farmers, activists, researchers, grandmothers and educators.

My friend reflected, "It was so beautiful, so full, it was almost as if we had won." In stepping forward in what may be the largest crowd the Montpelier Statehouse steps has ever seen, we grasp the power of regular folks coming together. For hateful rhetoric and discrimination to win takes compliance. Instead, on a Saturday afternoon, 15,000-20,000 Vermonters and friends marched for hope, embracing a civil society that includes all our voices. An awareness, even in the face of fear and change, passed through the crowd: a sense that everyday people have the power to place the dignity and rights of each person in the center of their own activity. It is through our decisions and interactions in our homes, schools, workplaces and community that we create the society we inhabit. It is up to us.



Thoughts from other Washington D.C. March Attendees

One of the best things about the March for me, was being able to go with my sister, and most of all my 12 year-old niece. At age 12, I never conceived of anything like a protest March. She was part of history although I am saddened she is growing up in a country where so many of her rights as a woman are endangered, not to mention the threats associated with further degradation of the natural environment. I was impressed with her stamina – we stood like sardines for well over an hour before we could really move, with a bathroom nowhere in sight and no place to sit. She was a trooper – taking it all in and was vocal about how exciting and important she felt it was to have been part of this amazing experience.

- Administrative Law Examiner Nelson Campbell

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