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Wendrah M. McCoy
Winthrop University

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Winthrop University Students Unite for Black Lives, All Lives

A mass of students lie scattered along the bricks of Scholars Walk. Some are face-down, arms sprawled alongside them, while others lie flat on their backs, with glazed eyes, as they stare into the gray sky, motionless and silent.

One student, in a hoodie, has tape over his mouth with “I can’t breathe” scrawled in black marker. A few others lie with signs rested across their chests reading “black lives matter; all lives matter.”

Some passersby whip out their cell phones for pictures. Others stare with what appears to be confusion, or maybe disdain, as they clutch their books and walk hurriedly around the crowd that lie before them.

This is the scene of a die-in protest held at Winthrop University on Tuesday to demonstrate solidarity with the protestors in Missouri and New York.

These protests come as a result of two recent grand jury decisions not to indict Officer Darren Wilson or Officer Daniel Panteleo, both white officers who killed unarmed African American men. Wilson, shot 18-year-old Michael Brown six times on Aug. 9 in Ferguson, Missouri. Panteleo used a chokehold, a banned practice in New York, to choke 43-year-old Eric Garner to death on July 17 in Staten Island, New York.

This die-in, consisting of about 75 students, was part of a three-part program, coordinated by the Winthrop Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (WU NAACP), the Theta Theta Chapter of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. and senior mass communication student Jarrion Manning. Its purpose was to allow students to actively engage in
campus-wide demonstrations, while also opening the conversation to speak about police brutality and race relations in America.

According to a 2014 U.S.A Today article, called “Local Police Involved in 400 Killings,” the FBI reported that nearly two times a week in the United States, a white officer killed a black person during a seven-year period, ending in 2012; 18 percent of the blacks killed were under age 21, compared to 8.7 percent of whites.

“A people under oppression will only go so long before they cry out. A people that have endured years of pain, torture, blood, will only go through so much before they cry out,” said senior Chandler Robinson, vice president of the Nu Chi Chapter of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. “The Civil Rights Act was signed 50 years ago, this year, and we are still dealing with the issues that we dealt with then. Our voices were not heard then, and so we have to make them heard now.”

According to the national NAACP website, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin. It also ended racial segregation in schools, the workplace and public facilities, as well as unequal application of voter registration requirements.

Several students present at the “BeyondFerguson” discussion forum, held on Monday night, in conjunction with the die-in and an “injustice march,” expressed that voting is one of the strongest ways for African Americans to combat police brutality.

“Power lies in the ballot and not the bullet,” said senior Ashley Collins, secretary of Zeta Phi Beta.
According to a U.S. News article, called “Midterm Turnout Down in 2014,” compared to 22 percent of the voting population, more than 40 percent of nonvoters were minorities, including blacks. And 13 percent were under age 30.

“It is very crucial that we get involved with local politics because the local level of the judicial system is what ruled for no indictment. So if we are going to make any changes in our community, any other community, we need to vote our people to be in higher, official positions,” Robinson said.

Senior Cameron Benton, president of Phi Beta Sigma, added that education is another crucial part of trying to put an end to the issue.

“It’s about educating ourselves on our rights and the laws that are actually in America. And when police officers, or any kind of law enforcement, comes to us as a threat, we’ll be smart enough to overcome that boundary,” Benton said.

Saani Perry, a junior education major and student coordinator for leadership initiatives, said he believed the solution is a bit more complicated than simply education.

“There are plenty of cases where you look and it’s an educated black man who’s still shot and killed. Sometimes we’re faced with a situation where it doesn’t really matter what happens, the end result is still going to be the end result,” Perry said. “However, African Americans tend to look suspicious; that’s just sort of the way it is in this society.”

The stigma, Perry said, is that some whites tend to automatically think that all black males are “thugs,” maybe because of the way they dress, talk or wear their hair.

“When I step out of the house, my purpose is not to intimidate you. My purpose is not to be harassed or even killed because of it. My clothes are not menacing to you; the stereotypes that
you have internalized about my people, that’s what scares you. And we need to start changing
that,” Benton said.

Collins said she believed that change starts with a shift in perception.

“Sometimes it’s not always just about our perception of [police] or their perception of us, but sometimes it’s just the fact that they’re in authority; sometimes it’s just about respecting
authority,” said junior Ray Green-McCanic, public relations chair of WU NAACP.

Benton agreed that the blame for tension between blacks and officers is not always on
law enforcement.

“[African Americans] also have to take responsibility too because the same negative
stereotypes that they place on us, we’ve also placed on them. Not every police officer is bad. In
their line of duty, it’s something that’s scary. Nobody wants to be taken away from their family;
nobody wants to be dead,” Benton said. “We have to learn that we can’t antagonize [police
officers] and not expect to be antagonized.”

Robinson said that black men are taught from birth that the system is not in favor of
them, which is why they instinctively act out of fear in response to law enforcement.

Senior Mike Blanton, a student who participated in the die-in, said he does not blame
African Americans for being afraid.

“I’ll tell you if I was a black man in America right now, I’d be scared sh*tless of the
police. I’m a white man and I’m scared sh*tless of the police,” he said.

Blanton said his passion for the “Black Lives Matter” Movement came recently after he
went on a ride along with a cop, who pulled over a black man.

“That man got pulled over, and when he did, he put up both of his hands. This officer
chuckled as he walked towards the car, don’t know if the man in the car heard him or not, but the
fact of the matter is the officer was laughing. The officer said ‘he thought he was funny putting his hands up, the whole Michael Brown bullsh*t, so I increased the ticket,’” Blanton said.

He said the language that the officer used to describe the man is what “disgusted” him the most.

“I have never seen anyone that I would say is a thug. No one. You tell me, why do people have to keep dying because of ignorance,” Blanton said.

DeVonte Walker, the president of WU NAACP, said that open conversations with people outside of the black community probably is the most crucial part of trying to erase racial stigmas against African Americans.

Walker also said that he is aware that this is a difficult task because oftentimes people of the “out-group” feel that they are not welcomed in race-related conversation or the black community itself.

“I feel like an important part of finding a solution to everything that’s going on is having communication amongst color lines,” Benton said. “We have these conversations among ourselves, but they [the out-group] don’t hear us. We have to invite them in to let them know that we are not just out here being thugs and doing riots. It begins with sitting down with them and actually having a heart-to-heart and seeing where everybody’s coming from, so that we may change the minds of those who actually push forth those stereotypes.”