LOCAL BLACK LIVES MATTER CHAPTER AIMS FOR CHANGE

KNOW JUSTICE, KNOW PEACE
MAKING SURE BLACK LIVES MATTER IN BIRMINGHAM

(First of two parts on fight against racial injustice in Birmingham)

BY AMEERA STEWARD
For the Birmingham Times

On a recent humid Friday afternoon, Eric Hall, Jilisa Milton, and Cara McClure did what they do best — they took to the streets of downtown Birmingham.

The gathering was not for one of the marches the trio has led or participated in as co-founders of Black Lives Matter (BLM) Birmingham. They were downtown to be photographed for a feature story on the BLM organization, which has become part of a galvanizing force for worldwide protests in the two months since the death of George Floyd, the African American man killed by police in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Even without hundreds of demonstrators filling the streets on this holiday weekend, the BLM Birmingham leaders hear voices of support from passersby, Black and white, on 3rd Avenue North outside of the Alabama Theater.

Present were Hall, 33, a former neighborhood association officer; Milton, 32, a University of Alabama graduate with degrees in law and social work; and McClure, 50, a strategist who recruited the others to establish the Magic City’s BLM chapter.

For these three activists, BLM Birmingham has become more than a rallying cry, organization, or a movement — it’s their life’s work.

“We want to affirm and uplift all Black lives,” Hall said. “People have grown tired [of racial injustice], and they are demanding for change in their communities not just on the federal level but on the local level.”

The group has already been instrumental in various causes on the local level. Last month, BLM Birmingham called on the city to dismiss inciting to riot charges against Jermaine “Funnymaine” Johnson, contending that the comedian was innocent of charges that stemmed from civil unrest in downtown Birmingham.

Charges against Johnson were dismissed the following week.

When City Council President William Parker in mid-June talked of possibly renaming 16th Street North to Black Lives Matter Boulevard, McClure, Hall, and Milton signed an “Open Letter to Birmingham Leaders” in opposition to the proposal. Their names were included as part of “A Group of Movement Voices” in a letter to Parker, the Birmingham City Council, and the City of Birmingham.

Parker’s plan was withdrawn.

In early 2017, BLM and others were outspoken against the Birmingham Violence Reduction Initiative (BVRi), a city-led effort during which police vehicles, including a SWAT truck and multiple officers in camouflage, poured into the Central Pratt community alarming some residents.

“We worked really hard to stop the [BVRi] because it involved a very heavy surveillant component,” Milton said. “We did public campaigns against it. We sat down with officials against it. … It was very organized. … We wrote opinions.”

Across the nation and certainly in Birmingham, many, like the passersby in downtown, are voicing mounting support for the BLM movement and several of its objectives, including divestment from the police and investment in Black communities, as well as immediate relief for communities and community control.

‘UNBREAKABLE BOND’

McClure remembers the early meetings with Milton and Hall in the living room of her Birmingham apartment, “where we built an unbreakable bond,” she said.

“We were able to create a family. … We shared meals. When [Milton] needed to come to Birmingham to study, she came to my house. … [Hall] would come by, and we just took over the living room. It was a special time that I will never forget because they were like my energy.”

Milton would drive up from Tuscaloosa, where she was enrolled at the University of Alabama, and Hall would come over.

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BLM’S ERIC HALL ON MATTERS OF THE MOVEMENT

BY AMEERA STEWARD
For the Birmingham Times

Activist Eric Hall grew up in two cities with names that make people think of Black lives.

The 33-year-old is originally from Flint, Michigan, a town known nationally for not providing clean drinking water to its mostly African American population. At age 9, he moved from there to Birmingham, a city with a name synonymous with the Civil Rights Movement.

"I never used to talk about the hard times, the bad times, the struggles that I had," Hall said. "But I feel like I have accomplished what I was meant to do, and I feel like I have accomplished what I was meant to do, and I feel like I have accomplished what I was meant to do."

"As a child, I admired him, so my dream job was to be a preacher."

"In the early 1980s, Flint was one of the poorest communities in the nation. Hall said he and his peers glorified gangs and gangster rap music and went as far as to form a community gang — but the Rev. Pointer, along with community elders and family members, broke up the gang and connected the boys with a mentoring group.

"In my later years, I found out how politically connected he was and his involvement with forming an AIDS outreach program in the church. Hall remembered: 'I would say this, I'm following the footsteps of a giant. I'm a preacher, I'm politically strong, and I've worked to combat human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and AIDS. The sky is the limit. Through serving God first and community, all things are possible.'"

"Hall himself has been a minister since 2000 at Peace Missionary Baptist Church in the Pratt City neighborhood. It was divine inspiration, he said."

"Through my involvement with church, through building a relationship with Christ, I discovered that I had a unique calling on my life, and I followed that calling," he said."

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"My mother sacrificed to provide for her children. It’s from her that I learned my work ethic, … [as well as] how to be resilient."

"She literally only earned a dollar increase for every 10 years that she worked," Hall said. "Those are some of the changes we have to begin to look at … and begin to address."

"A SCARY TIME"

When Hall was 9 years old, his mother moved the family of five (he has three brothers and one sister) back to her hometown of Birmingham. That was in 1991. "It was really a scary time, now that I think about it," Hall said. "I think about all the horrible policing practices [I witnessed] as a child, and that's what I really see in my head — images of what we called the 'Jump Out Boys,' … [police] literally going after every male figure in my community; even if guys were just standing outside, hanging out, [they] seemed suspect. The bad memory just stuck in my head."

Those experiences skewed Hall’s perspective of police officers, he acknowledged, adding that he’s always been fearful of the police. "I honestly was terrified of the police," he said. "That’s a common trigger a lot of people have, even when they get older. If someone is driving and the police get behind [them], … the person automatically just gets really nervous and jittery."

"A lot of that fear came back approximately three or four years ago, when the
While visiting home from college at University of Alabama, she and her brother were home alone. Her brother went to a neighbor’s house, and when he crossed the grass on his way back to their home, somehow— one called the police thinking he was an intruder.

Racial Justice Birmingham, a group dedicated to community organizing, mobilizing, and education; “Black Mamá’s Bail Out Day” in Birmingham, which raised money to bail out incarcerated Black mothers and help reunite them with their children and families ahead of Mother’s Day; and Faith and Works, a statewide civic engagement collective.

HELD AT GUNPOINT

All of McClure’s community work aligned with what Milton saw as part of her mission. Milton is not only a co-founder of BLM Birmingham but also one of the people the organization was founded to protect.

When the police arrived, they held Milton at gunpoint.

At the time of the incident, she said she didn’t believe she had the power to say anything or even had the right to be enraged.

“That was something I experienced personally, but I never said anything … because I didn’t understand how to process and what to do to get anything done about it,” said Milton.

Although she was born in New York, Milton became familiar with Birmingham; she and her four siblings were moved to the city by her grandparents when she was in first grade. They lived in College Hills and then moved to Roebuck when she was in seventh grade.

She would soon find her voice as both an activist and an attorney. Milton earned a bachelor’s degree in social work in 2012, a master’s degree in social work in 2013, a Juris Doctor degree in 2019 from University of Alabama; she also was awarded the prestigious Equal Justice Works Fellowship to protect the rights of children with disabilities in the Black Belt.

During Milton’s first year in law school, Phlandrous Castle, a 32-year-old Black man was fatally shot by a police officer during a traffic stop in St. Paul, Minnesota, while his partner and four-year-old daughter were in the vehicle watching. Also, in that same year Alton Sterling, a 37-year-old Black man, was shot dead by two police officers in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

“There was something about the Phlandrous Castle video that just reminded me of my own experience,” Milton said. “I wouldn’t say I have a trauma connection, … but there was something about that summer and me just needing to stop talking and doing something.”

Milton contacted the BLM Birmingham chapter on Facebook, and the rest is history.

“I always wanted to do work related to … how to use the legal system,” she said. “I was a social worker, as well, wanting to talk about the way trauma affects people and wanting it to just stop because I felt like I had this one experience but I had to relive it all the time. I was tired of it, of having to relive the same thing I went through over and over again every few months.”

CONTINUOUS POLICE SHOOTINGS

McClure knew about Hall and his work within the community. He was a neighborhood officer: president of the Central Pratt Neighborhood Association; on staff with Jefferson County AIDS in Minorities Inc.; a candidate for Birmingham City Council, which he ran for unsuccessfully in 2013. But protests during the Trayvon Martin era strengthened Hall’s fight against racial injustice.

“After the killings of Martin and Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old carrying a toy gun who was shot and killed by a police officer in Cleveland, Ohio. I thought that by now, at this point, years later, we would have come up with a system that works, that we wouldn’t be dealing with continuous police shootings, that we would call for policy change and maybe get those wins, and that was probably going to be it,” he said.

“Unfortunately, Black people keep being killed in these situations. Even when there were protests. Even when there were signs, like moments or breaks, as soon as it would happen again, we would find ourselves being called to the forefront to address these issues all over again.”

The second of two parts — in the Thursday, July 16, edition of The Birmingham Times and online — will feature some local activists whose mission is to create an inclusive, socially just community and ensure that Black lives matter.
“I think people — and when I say ‘people,’ … I mean the everyday person — need to have these conversations I’m seeing on my social media. I’m saying there’s something missing in what people are connecting to this moment in 2020.” JILISA MILTON

role models in the movement at Miles College, [for instance], and connecting them with some of the students there currently.

“We would like to support a conversation with some of the students there, as far as what they can do today to prepare the movement, … to kind of share some of the information from the old blueprint, maybe utilize some of it, and build on that to make it relevant to the youth in this modern-day movement.”

Hall added that BLM is a place where all Black people can come together.

“Whether you’re Black and trans, Black and disabled, queer, whatever, … [it’s] an organization that a lot of Black youth have felt connected to,” he said. “They’ve felt like they weren’t being judged, … like they didn’t necessarily have to show up in a suit and a tie to fight for their humanity. We embrace that, and that’s why this movement continues to go as strong as it is—we’re not held to respectability politics; we’re not held to a higher standard.”
HALL
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Birmingham Violence Reduction Initiative (BVRI) started. Hall was driving in his community of Pratt City, when he saw alarmed residents watch camouflaged-clad police officers in army-style vehicles raid a street without warning. BLM met with community members and elected officials who represented the area.

"It was an opportunity for those in elected positions to hear the voices and concerns of the community," he said.

COMMUNITY WORK
Hall's community work goes beyond racial injustice. In 2006, he started street outreach with Jefferson County AIDS in Minorities Inc., an HIV and AIDS service organization.

"That was the first job where I was responsible for providing community education to the homeless population and to underserved and underdeveloped communities throughout the Birmingham metropolitan area," Hall said.

In 2011, he was also responsible for helping individuals find housing and rebuild their lives after the devastating tornadoes that struck the area that year. Hall was concerned about the way federal and state dollars were being spent in the aftermath and decided in 2013 to run for the Birmingham City Council District 9 seat.

"I was very new in politics, ... so I didn't know how to raise funds, didn't know how to really do a lot of things. I just knew I had a passion for it and wanted to see something happen," he said.

Hall finished third in the race — but remembers it as "a year of change" for him.

"After canvassing District 9 and hearing from residents it was clear that residents wanted a representative who could understand government, legislative processes and policies."

He decided to enroll at Miles College who educated a long list of notable Birmingham leaders including the Honorable UW Clemon and former mayors Richard Arrington, Bernard Kincaid and William Bell. "Miles College has a rich legacy of social activism and continues to be on the forefront of fighting for social justice and equity," said Hall, who graduated with a bachelor's degree in political science in 2018 and is now a graduate student studying social work at Alabama Agriculture and Mechanical University.

As for politics, Hall plans to run for City Council again in 2021.

"It's not about me," he said. "I'm running because ... I envision a Birmingham that can be really beautiful out of all of the [systemic injustice, racial inequities, and inequitable communities and services]. ... We can change policies, we can change systems so they are more inclusive and not exclusive, so those systems can work for all people.

"I see an opportunity for a change, and I believe it's possible that we can build off this momentum to make that happen."

BLM BIRMINGHAM
In 2016, Hall was recruited for the BLM Birmingham chapter by Cara McClure, a member of the original local chapter.

"At the time, I just wanted to be part of an organization that ... I deemed to be relevant in this moment," Hall said, adding that he didn't imagine having to continue the movement. "I believe we need to find a way to reflect that Black Lives Matter."

"At the time, I just wanted to be part of an organization that ... I deemed to be relevant in this moment," Hall said, adding that he didn't imagine having to continue the work for so long.

"After the killings of Trayvon Martin, [an unarmed 17-year-old shot and killed by a neighborhood watchman in Sanford, Florida], and Tamir Rice, [a 12-year-old killed by police in Cleveland, Ohio], I thought that by now, at this point, years later, we would have come up with a system that works, that we wouldn't be dealing with continuous police shootings, that we would call for policy change and maybe get those wins, and that was probably going to be it," he said.

"Unfortunately, Black [people] kept being killed by police. Even though we would take moments or breaks, as soon as it would happen again, we would find ourselves being called to the forefront to address these issues all over again.

So many of the demands and recommendations activists are making now are the same ones made when Martin was killed, Hall said. "We've grown tired, so we're a little more aggressive now than we were these past years. We're really pushing now."

"I see with this movement that young people are literally leading," he said. "A lot of our youth are on the front lines; children are now engaged and involved. ... [Young people] want immediate change, so I'm excited about the rebirth of this movement."

As former president of the Central Pratt Neighborhood Association, many of Hall's concerns deal with communities.

"My thing is we need to find a way to return power back to the people and allow the people to have a stronger voice in policies as it relates to their city," said Hall, who is dedicated seeing that changes made beyond Birmingham, too. "[Alabama should be] somewhere we all can live and also thrive. We're not fighting for equality but equity. Until we see that, my commitment is going to be to [make] sure that the policies reflect that Black Lives Matter."