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COVER STORY

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Parker's plan was withdrawn.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 sur-



From left: Jilisa Milton, Cara McClure and Eric Hall, co-founders, Black Lives Matter Birmingham. For these three activists, BLM Birmingham has become more than a rallying cry, organization, or a movement — it's their life's work. (AMARR CROSKY, FOR THE BIRMINGHAM TIMES)

veillance component," Milton said. "We did public campaigns against it. We sat down with officials against it. ... It was very organic. ... 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

CONTINUED ON PAGE 14

COVER STORY

Eric Hall, co-founder, Black Lives Matter Birmingham. (AMARR CROSKY PHOTOS, FOR THE BIRMINGHAM TIMES)

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.

"If I can do something today that will make life better for people tomorrow, then I feel like I will have accomplished what I was meant to do," Hall said. "So, I live life each day to make a difference for not just me but for others ... that they have better days ahead. ... I just uplift all of my ancestors who have died. Their blood lays in the street, ... so I just want to honor their legacy, to honor their names, to fight."

Hall is a co-founder of Black Lives Matter (BLM) Birmingham, the local chapter of a movement dedicated to advocating for non-violent civil disobedience in protest against injustices toward African American people; he was recruited by Cara McClure, who was familiar with some of his activism.

"I've been part of BLM [since 2016], before the water crisis [in Flint], but that is a reason why I fight," Hall said. "Issues like that ... encourage and inspire my activism."

GIANT FOOTSTEPS

Hall has always identified himself as a

helper. His mentor, the late Dr. Arthur J. Pointer, was a strong community-oriented pastor in Flint and an inspiration for the young Hall.

"I didn't realize until much later the impact the Rev. Pointer had on my life," Hall said. "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 come 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.

Along with Rev. Pointer as a role model, Hall also points to his mother, Rosetta Hall.



"She is the epitome of a servant leader," he said. "She had an incomparable work ethic and love for [her] community."

"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."

Hall's mother worked her entire adult life for minimum wage. In the early 1990s, she earned approximately \$4 an hour; when she retired around 2011, she got up to \$7.15 or \$7.25 an hour.

"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. Like many young Black men in the community, Hall ran at the sight 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

CONTINUED ON PAGE 16

COVER STORY

BLM

CONTINUED from PAGE 12

from the Central Pratt community in west Birmingham, where he lived and served as a neighborhood officer.

The national BLM organization began as a rallying cry in 2013, following the acquittal of George Zimmerman on second-degree murder and manslaughter charges in the killing of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida. In February 2012, Zimmerman, then a neighborhood watchman, followed, shot, and killed the unarmed Martin during a physical altercation between the two. BLM — founded by Opal Tometi, Alicia Garza, and Patrisse Cullors — evolved into a hashtag, a movement, and an organization to advocate for nonviolent civil disobedience in protests against incidents of injustice and police brutality against African Americans.

A group was started in Birmingham but disbanded. Eventually, McClure, who was part of the original group, re-established the local chapter: “We needed one that was connected to the women who started it all,” she said, adding that she contacted Hall and Milton, as well as Martez Files, who this year founded his own group, When We Fight.

“I had been seeing [Hall] on social media speaking out about different things,” McClure said. “I also saw [Milton on Facebook] asking a question about how to join, so I went to her page, looked her up, and saw that this was somebody I would like to work with.”

McClure went from being a housewife and business owner of ASAP Apartment Locators, which helps individuals and families find their ideal homes, to a community activist and organizer in a few weeks — something that “gradually happened without me noticing,” she said.

“CAPTURED MY ATTENTION”

McClure really embarked on her activism efforts after her then-19-year-old son said to her the day Zimmerman was acquitted, “Mom, your generation dropped the ball.”

“That captured my attention,” she recalled. “I started imaging a different world, ... where my son, [Brandon McClure, now 26], could go out and not worry about being profiled by police. ... I just wanted to see a different world, especially in a city that is 74 percent Black. ... After listening [to news coverage of Zimmerman’s acquittal] for more than an hour, ... I was in tears, and I said, ‘When I come home [from visiting Memphis, Tennessee], we can find a protest to go to.’”

Her son’s words also took her back to the years 2008 through 2011, when McClure and her son were homeless in Atlanta, Georgia, sleeping on floors because she was separated from her spouse.

“I remember one night sleeping on this lady’s floor, just crying out and asking God to make me a difference maker,” she said. “I didn’t know what form that was going to take, but years later I was presented with the opportunity to actually do that.”

McClure and her son found a flyer advertising a protest being held for Martin in Birmingham on Highway 280, which she and her son attended in December 2014. Soon thereafter, activism became her life.

Where she once focused on her family — being a mom and wife, making an income — she turned to putting her all into BLM.

“I felt conflicted when selling and focusing on luxury apartments,” McClure said. “I felt like, in order for me to really be in this [activism] space and really be authentic, I needed to just step away a little bit, ... to learn about what was happening in the



Cara McClure, co-founder, Black Lives Matter Birmingham. (AMARR CROSKY, FOR THE BIRMINGHAM TIMES)

“I felt conflicted when selling and focusing on luxury apartments. I felt like, in order for me to really be in this [activism] space and really be authentic, I needed to just step away a little bit, ... to learn about what was happening in the world ... [related to] racial injustice, the criminal justice system, [things] I wasn’t paying attention to [before].” **CARA MCCLURE**

world ... [related to] racial injustice, the criminal justice system, [things] I wasn’t paying attention to [before].”

How serious was McClure about activism?

She and her husband had been separated in Atlanta but divorced after her increased role with BLM because “he just couldn’t take that lifestyle anymore — me going to jail, me always inviting folks over for meetings,” she said.

“There was so much demand, and this new demand on me wasn’t generating income or generating happiness or joy,” McClure added. “I was in the house angry all the time or in tears or just wanting to watch ... what was happening ... in the country or watching protests all the time because ... I was trying to get into my BLM role.”

McClure’s work included more than BLM. She also helped launch Showing Up for

Racial Justice Birmingham, a group dedicated to community organizing, mobilizing, and education; “Black Mamas Bail Out Day” in Birmingham, which raised money to help 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.

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, someone called the police thinking he was an intruder.

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 it and what to do to get anything done about it,” said Milton.

Although she was born in New York, Milton was 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 2019, and 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, Philando Castile, 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 Philando Castile 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 do 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] 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.”

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.

COVER STORY

HOW BLM BIRMINGHAM PLANS TO GROW STATEWIDE

BY AMEERA STEWARD
For the Birmingham Times

Upcoming goals for BLM Birmingham include work on a people's budget, a participatory budget for the city that can be expanded across the state, said members of the organization.

Cara McClure, co-founder, said the group would like to become the "gatekeeper, per se, of BLM Alabama, creating chapters in every city, ... basically to continue doing the work, leading the activist community, and making sure we provide training, such as direct action training."

Jilisa Milton, co-founder, said she would like to devote more attention to political education: "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. ... In order for a progressive movement to continue, we have to participate in discussions with our community."

Eric Hall, co-founder, added that they plan to have critical conversations around race and racism, as well as engage in discussions with movement elders, particularly those involved with the Civil Rights Movement, and movement youth.

"This conversation is going to be centered around hope and healing, moving forward toward solutions," Hall said. "We envision a panel of leaders ... who were

"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 held to a higher standard."



Jilisa Milton, co-founder, Black Lives Matter Birmingham. (AMARR CROSKY, FOR THE BIRMINGHAM TIMES)

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PROTESTS ONGOING



Protests, marches, and silent vigils have been a daily occurrence in the Birmingham area since the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis. (TIMES FILE PHOTOS)

COVER STORY

HALL

CONTINUED from PAGE 13

Birmingham Violence Reduction Initiative (BVRI) started. Hall was driving in his community of Pratt City, when he saw alarmed residents watch camouflage-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 fundraise, 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 change," he said.



Eric Hall, co-founder, Black Lives Matter Birmingham. (AMARR CROSKY, FOR THE BIRMINGHAM TIMES)

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 compassionate about their concerns also educated enough to understand government, legislative pro-

cesses and policies."

He decided to enroll at Miles College who educated a long list of notable Birmingham leaders including the Honorable U.W. 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 really be 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 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

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] 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.

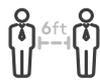
"My thing is we need to find a way to return power back to the people and allow the people to have a stronger voice in policies as it relates to their city," said Hall, who is dedicated seeing that change is made beyond Birmingham, too. "[Alabama should be] somewhere we all can live and also thrive. 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."



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