

## Anti-racism rally held in Evanston, days after Confederate flag towel displayed at beach

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Karla Thomas leads a group onto Lighthouse Beach during an anti-racism rally in Evanston on July 31, 2020. (Brian O'Mahoney / Pioneer Press)

Hundreds gathered Friday afternoon near Lighthouse Beach in Evanston, days after visitors displaying a Confederate flag beach towel were confronted by a resident.

In a widely shared social media video posted Wednesday, Evanston resident LaShandra Smith-Rayfield is seen confronting the beachgoers, who were displaying the flag towel on a temporary fence at the beach.

"That right there is a racist symbol of hate," said Smith-Rayfield in the video.

"This is the United States of America. We have 50 stars on our flag," said Smith-Rayfield.

Evanston Mayor Steve Hagerty later called Smith-Rayfield's actions a display of "courage and persistence" that are "admirable and an example for all of us."

In response to the confrontation, a rally against racism was organized by several groups, including Anti-Racism In Action and Every Single Person Committed to Anti-Racism, according to a Facebook event posting.

The rally, which began at 2 p.m., drew at least a couple hundred people to a grassy area near Lighthouse Beach. Speakers, including an emotional Smith-Rayfield, shared their own experiences with the assembled crowd.

"I am tired," she said, fighting back tears. "I'm an optimistic person. I am optimistic about the country that I live in and that is such a weight to wear because I hope beyond hope we can actually rise to the ideals that we like to profess online and in our yards with signs. But we don't rise."



LaShandra Smith-Rayfield speaks during an anti-racism rally near Lighthouse Beach in Evanston. (Brian O'Mahoney / Pioneer Press)

Smith-Rayfield, who is Black, encouraged white members of the audience to take action beyond social media statements.

“I’m saying open your mouth and call your neighbors and your family members to the carpet. I’m not asking for white guilt,” she said. “Because if you are indeed guilty that means the verdict has been set and you cannot change yourself. There’s a difference between guilt and shame. I’m asking that you have a little shame in your behavior ... it means that you have recognized the mistakes you have made and you are going to actively work to correct them.”

Smith-Rayfield said she arrived at the beach Wednesday after hearing on social media about the flag’s presence. She said she hoped it was not true, but when she arrived was disappointed that no one else had spoken up about its presence. When she confronted the group, she did not receive support from others at the beach in the moment.

“We want Evanston to be a place where my children can ride their bikes. That my children can skate. That my children can read on the beach,” Smith-Rayfield said. “That my children can feel safe in.”

Fuschia Winston-Rodriguez of Evanston was one of the organizers of the event. She echoed Smith-Rayfield’s sentiments that words and signs alone were not enough, action is needed when it comes to fighting racism.

“I have asked you all to come here today to make racist people uncomfortable,” Winston-Rodriguez said. “I’m talking about all those folks who sat on the beach in silence and did nothing. That’s racism.”

She encouraged the crowd to consider issues like education, the investment in Black businesses and Black neighborhoods and police misconduct.

“This system of racist oppression that is killing us doesn’t belong to me,” she said. “White people, this is yours.”

After about an hour, the speeches concluded, and in an agreement with the city, those gathered were allowed to march along the beach 50 people at a time. Groups took turns to allow social distancing measures to remain in place.



Trisha Connelly of Evanston holds a sign during an anti-racism rally at Lighthouse Beach in Evanston July 31, 2020. (Brian OMahoney / Pioneer Press)

Marchers chanted “Black lives matter” and “Black peace matters” as they made their way along the beach. The peaceful rally drew a crowd of all ages, many carrying signs.

Deborah Berkman of Chicago said she attended because when she heard about the confrontation, she felt she needed to do something to stand up and show her support.

“I just wanted it not to be easy for people to bring their hate here,” Berkman said. “I want to make it uncomfortable.”

Betty Lambert lives in Evanston and said she attended the event for her children and future generations.

“When I saw the video I was appalled,” she said. “At this date and time, we’re still facing racial inequality. This is the time to get it right.”

*Brian L. Cox is a freelance reporter. Staff reporter Genevieve Bookwalter contributed.*

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