

Reporter's Notebook: Student journalists find a grieving city

When the Daily Egyptian decided to send staff to Louisville to cover the protests, we prepared to walk into a war zone. Instead, we found ourselves welcomed into a grieving community, where people were attempting to cope with the loss of Breonna Taylor.

Taylor was killed March 13. when three Louisville Metro Police entered her apartment with a battering ram while executing a no-knock raid in plain clothes. In the confusion of police entering the residence, Taylor's boyfriend shot at police and officers responded by firing 30 bullets, killing Taylor. A grand jury decided the officers shouldn't face criminal charges in her death.

See more: [Correcting misinformation about Breonna Taylor](#)



A protester reacts after the Louisville Police Department fired flashbangs into the crowd of protesters on Saturday, Sept. 25, 2020. (Photo by Isabel Miller)

We were discouraged from going to Louisville by three journalism professors at our school, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. The three, all longtime journalists, told us it would be an unnecessary risk, that we would be walking into a dangerous situation, and we would not find anything the wires hadn't already published.

During our discussions on whether or not we should go and how we should cover it, we realized the wires were mostly focused on event and protest coverage. The four of us, Jared Treece, Isabel Miller and the two of us did not want to sit this out. The director of our School, documentarian Jan Thompson, agreed and gave us the go-ahead, telling one of the nervous

professors that this story was like the Vietnam protests of his generation.

One of the stories we were hoping to tell was of the religious community's involvement during the protests. Before arriving, we reached out to a Catholic nun, Sister Beth Murphy in central Illinois to connect us to religious leaders or activists in Louisville.

Murphy immediately sent names, emails, phone numbers and any information about who could be helpful. Within 24 hours, multiple Catholic sisters had put us in contact with organizers and activists in Louisville. We connected with three of our sources. Sister Murphy told us we were in the prayers of dozens of Catholic sisters. Later, Brother Tim Duncan, whom we met during the nightly protests, said he is 63-years-old and couldn't think of a more important time to be a journalist than right now and encouraged us in our work.

One of the first people we called was Sister Judy Morris, who directed us to Felicia Garr who declared herself our "Black mom in Louisville."

Garr, a 52-year-old Black woman and Louisville native, gave us our first interview, let us know the lay of the land, directed us to all the protests and passed along any information she could.

Garr has been involved with organizing and participating in protests since the details of the Breonna

Taylor case first
came out. She has a daughter the same age as Taylor.

When we got to our hotel, she called us again,
gave us a safety speech with tips on how to conduct ourselves
and directed us
to “not eat the food because Coronavirus is real.” Once we had
ourselves
situated we hit the streets to walk towards Jefferson Square
Park, ground zero
for the Black Lives Matter Breonna Taylor protests in downtown
Louisville.

We crossed into cordoned off downtown via
Liberty Street and 2nd Avenue through the large concrete
dividers placed to
prevent vehicle traffic from entering the area in preparation
of protests. The
streets were devoid of the life and vibrance normally
associated with a
bustling downtown as we passed boarded up buildings up until
we reached
Jefferson Square Park or as the protesters dubbed it
“Injustice Square.”

The small square – which is situated in the
heart of Louisville’s legal buildings, with the county grand
jury building to
the south, the county court to the north, City Hall on the
northwest corner,
and the county jail on the southwest corner – held all the
life and energy of
the deserted downtown. There was a beautiful memorial in the
center of the
square in honor of Breonna Taylor surrounded by a community
garden, free therapists,
lawyers, medics offering medical care, and tents providing
everyone with free

food, water and masks.

A few hundred protesters milled around in the square, laughing, eating and dancing. There were young people, children, older people, people in wheelchairs or with walkers and individuals of every color.

Our team – made up of three white journalists and one Latino journalist – felt completely safe and comfortable with the protesters. Most people were polite and happy to speak with us for interviews, which was a nice change from the treatment we normally receive from our own university's administration.

We expected to be looked down upon for being student journalists, but whenever we introduced ourselves as “student journalists with the Daily Egyptian” people brightened, supported us and were put at ease. We even met some former Salukis and Southern Illinoisans.

Even the local journalists took us in and offered advice, assistance and community. (Other student journalists also were covering the protests).

One of the members of our group, Nick, the co-author, was a prior professionally employed photojournalist who had made connections through the various social media networks. He met one of the Louisville Courier-Journal photographers at the square who helped provide

information. From sending texts to where the protesters were meeting, to giving advice on what to do if law enforcement agencies cleared "Injustice Square" after curfew, Max Gersh was an excellent connection to have in Louisville.

Another photographer, Michael M. Santiago, who works for Getty Images, gave our group Sudecon wipes, which are used to decontaminate the face and eyes after getting sprayed with irritants such as mace or tear gas. Fortunately we didn't have to use them.

Santiago warned us and told us to be wary, but said protesters and the press had an understanding and looked after one another.

The protesters protected us, tried to feed us, give us water and even offered us rides to the "safe place," First Unitarian Church. They felt protected by the media's presence.

Whenever a tense moment arose between protesters and the police, they would call for the press to be front and center and ask us to record what was happening.

When the peaceful march through the East Market Neighborhood was met by a police blockade at East Market and South Hancock St. an organizer with a bullhorn shouted "all the press to the front! Show the world what they do to a peaceful protest!"

While the protests and marches during the day were peaceful on both sides, we were told that at night, all bets were off.

Curfew was terrifying. Police and law enforcement officers on roof tops would loudly announce if you did not disperse, you would be arrested.

The reporters and protesters around us wore all kinds of protective gear, from shin guards, bullet proof vests, goggles and helmets, to rifles and handguns. No one had any illusions of absolute safety and everyone was tense, knowing that at any moment, things could get rough. When people weren't chanting, an eerie silence would fall over the square broken only by the helicopters buzzing overhead.

On Friday night, we walked around downtown after curfew and interviewed people at First Unitarian. Two young girls, one of whom we learned was 15 and another who looked as though she couldn't have been older than 13, joined our group crying and screaming for help.

They got behind us and one grabbed onto our shirts and hid. A police car with its lights on jerked across the road. As it came speeding up behind the girls, they threw their hands up. The officer shouted at the girls through the window causing them to cry more.

They had been separated from their cousin and were lost trying to find the church to seek sanctuary and get off of the streets during the curfew.

Once the police realized we were press and saw that we had taken our phones out to record, they calmed down

and let the girls stay with us. One girl begged for a ride because she sprained her ankle, but the officers refused and drove off. We sent two of our members ahead to the church to get a medic and walked with the injured girl until an older woman pulled over and offered to drive her.

During a peaceful afternoon Friday, officers performed kettling maneuvers and boxed protesters in on all sides, resulting in a tense standoff where the officers set off flashbangs.

A protester collapsed to the ground when this happened and one of our photographers, Isabel Miller, took photos. Another protester ran up, grabbed her and attempted to force her to delete her photographs.

She was able to convince him to let go of her by deleting one of the several photos she took of the moment. She later posted one of these takes to Instagram to emphasize what occurred during the police-protester clash.

Max Gersh, the Courier-Journal photographer, said this situation was the only time during his coverage of the protests he put on the helmet he carries with him.

We are in no way saying this is the experience of all journalists covering Louisville. Members of the press have been arrested and injured in the city on multiple occasions. We were only there two nights and there have been points during the 124 days of

demonstrating where
Louisville has been dangerous. Two officers were shot just
last week in the
wake of the grand jury's decision.

But this was our experience; we are grateful
to the community that accepted us and allowed us to tell their
stories.

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