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TOP STORY

Local residents chant 'Gun Control Now' at local March for Our Lives event

By AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com Mar 24, 2018



People walk in the March for Our Lives on Saturday, March 24, 2018, on the square. (Austin Anthony/photo@bgdailynews.com)

Austin Anthony

Warning that their lives and families are on the line, hundreds of students, teachers and local residents marched Saturday through downtown Bowling Green as part of the national March for Our Lives to call for tighter gun laws.

As survivors of last month's school shooting in Parkland, Fla., led thousands in Washington, D.C., local students made their own voices heard by marching from Cherry Hall at Western Kentucky University to Fountain Square Park.

Among them was 10-year-old Mackenzie Morgan, who carried a sign that read "Yes people kill people, but guns make it easy."

Mackenzie was joined by her mother, Andrea, who teaches for the Simpson County Literacy Center. Unable to imagine her mom carrying a gun, Mackenzie said more resources should be put into school counselors so troubled students can have someone to talk to.

She also doesn't put much stock in the idea that kids shouldn't be involved in politics.

"Kids can sometimes have more of an impact than adults," she said, adding that kids are more honest and willing to speak up. "I'd like to see more people trying to help."

Hundreds of demonstrators marched down College Street chanting "We call B.S." and "Gun control now!" The event, organized by WKU students and local activist groups, featured several speakers who highlighted gun violence in African-American, LGBTQ and other communities.

Among those speaking was 20-year-old Eli Parker, who accidentally shot himself in the head when he was 4 years old. Parker, who still suffers from anxiety attacks, stood in the cold rain and choked back tears as he begged lawmakers to take action.

"We have to work to make sure things are better for those like me, those who could be like me and those who also suffer. Parkland, Columbine, Sandy Hook, all these kids that survived are going to have to live with that," he told the crowd. "We have to do something."

Haley Parker-Rinehart, Eli's mother and a representative of Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America, called on protesters to keep up the pressure on lawmakers by going to the polls.

"Thoughts and prayers obviously are not working," she said.

Veronica Reed, who spoke as an activist with Black Lives Matter, thanked local students for participating in recent school walkouts despite negative comments they received. She also credited African-Americans for their role in anti-violence movements and highlighted the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., among others.

"By disrupting spaces, we refuse to allow our collective pain to be confined to our own communities," she said. "Others may not see their children in the faces of those lost to gun violence, but they will not be permitted to dismiss us."

Dana Cuomo, a WKU professor in Diversity and Community Studies, also spoke and noted that many mass shootings are connected to domestic violence.

"Since 2008, the majority of mass shootings have involved shooters with a domestic violence history," she said. "If you are a woman in the United States, you are far more likely to be killed with a gun by an intimate partner than by any other weapon or by somebody you don't know."

Cuomo referenced 16-year-old Jaelynn Willey, who was taken off life support and died after another student opened fire in her Maryland school. The shooter, 17-year-old Austin Rollins, was killed and had been in a relationship with Jaelynn, according to police.

"Jaelynn's death was a domestic violence homicide," Cuomo said. She called for greater awareness of the issue and more rigorous background checks to prevent abusers from getting guns.

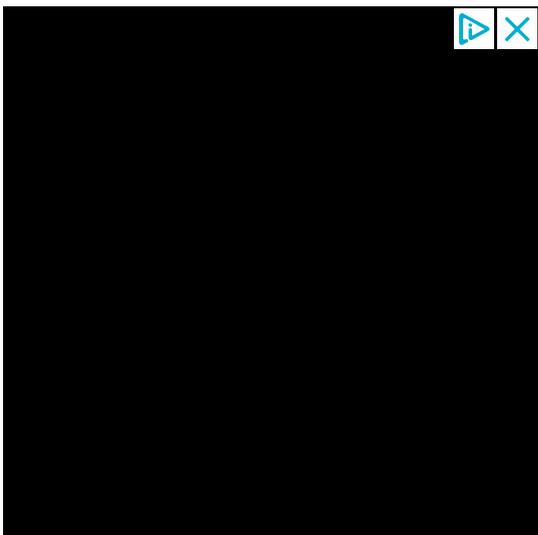
Many parents attended the event with their children, with some as young as 7 years old or younger.

Melinda Grimsley-Smith attended with her husband and their 4-year-old and 8-year-old daughters. She carried a sign that read “Arm teachers with school supplies.”

Smith, who works at WKU and teaches a class in its Mahurin Honors College, comes from a family of educators. Although she also grew up around guns and hunting, she’s alarmed at what she described as the unchecked flow of guns into the public. She said there’s a difference between owning a rifle or shotgun and a weapon like an AR-15.

“I definitely support a ban on weapons that belong in the military,” she said.

She added teachers and schools shouldn’t have the sole responsibility of preventing gun violence.



“They don’t have anything to do with gun laws,” she said.

Her daughter, 8-year-old Nuala Smith, agreed and carried her own sign.

“Our lives are more important than guns,” she said, noting her willingness to march despite the weather. “Even if I get cold feet, I’m still marching.”

Nearby, U.S. Army veteran Denise Anderson held a sign that read “This Army veteran supports common-sense gun control keeping weapons of war out of schools.”

As a veteran, Anderson said she was trained to use an M16 assault rifle and other weapons. She said more needs to be done to establish safe storage laws and end the “vicious circle” of mass shootings. At 62 years old, she said the nation’s gun laws have only grown more lax in her lifetime.

“Now every couple of weeks you’ve got another mass shooting in schools,” she said.

However, the activism she’s seen from young people is uplifting, she said.

“Here are these children speaking up and getting it done,” despite fecklessness from adult lawmakers, she said.

“It’s time to listen to the kids,” she said, quoting the Bible’s book of Psalms: “Out of the mouths of babes.”

Warren Central High School junior Kasey Key agreed.

“We just want to go to school and be able to feel safe,” she said.

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