

One of Five Million: A Story of Showing Up and Being Counted

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Abstract: On January 21, 2017, people of all backgrounds—women and men and gender nonconforming people, young and old, of diverse faiths, differently abled, immigrants and indigenous—came together, 5 million strong, on all seven continents of the world. We were answering a call to show up and be counted as those who believe in a world that is equitable, tolerant, just and safe for all, one in which the human rights and dignity of each person is protected and our planet is safe from destruction. Grounded in the nonviolent ideology of the Civil Rights Movement, the Women’s March was the largest coordinated protest in U.S. history and one of the largest in world history (Women’s March, n.d.).

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I was one of those 5 million people participating in the Women’s March and this is my story. There are millions of other stories about what prompted so many people to protest peacefully for basic human rights. There are millions of other stories of women, men, gender nonconforming people, and children traveling to Washington, DC and to many other cities and towns across the globe to protest and proclaim their beliefs and values. Marchers included those prominent in the Women’s Movement, elected officials, entertainers and, yes, millions of ordinary people like me who were moved to take action. There was even a small group of quilters who “marched” at their quilt retreat in Spring Mill State Park in Indiana. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) organized more than 500 social workers (Clayton, 2017) to participate in the various marches, but I suspect that number is a huge underestimate of the actual number of social workers who participated in the marches. I, for one, was not included in that count of 500 since I went on my own, taking a plane from Indianapolis to DC.

From the moment I heard about a potential march, I was sure I needed to be there, to stand up for what is right and to be part of history. I have been an activist since high school when I wrote letters to school board members in support of a teacher denied tenure, and I worked on President Kennedy’s campaign and the GOTV effort. I marched in the 60s for civil rights and worked on a general strike in Boston to protest the Vietnam War. In my heart, I knew this Women’s March would be historic and I wanted to be there. I wanted to be there because I felt (and still do) that everything that I have ever fought for was under attack with the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States. And I knew that being the daughter of two social workers and a social worker myself, I could not stand by in a helpless daze while rights were taken away.

I called my sister, Laurie, in California to encourage her to march with me. As it turns out, she had an old law school friend (Sandy) who lives blocks from the National Mall and she ended up hosting a whole houseful of guests from around the country, connected with her through various contacts—what an eclectic group we were. I suspect that all over the DC metropolitan area there were many who opened their homes to “friends of friends” who then became friends in the process.

I flew into DC on Thursday before the March so I could do some other things while I was in town. On the plane, I sat next to a Republican attorney from Indianapolis. He was a contributor to the Pence campaign and had been invited to the Inauguration, but was told they must wear suits to all events. He seemed a bit resentful of that mandate. When I asked what he hoped Pence would accomplish as vice president, he said, “Keep Trump under control.” We both laughed. He asked if I was going to the Inauguration as well, and I told him I was attending the Women’s March (I was not wearing my pink pussy hat at the time) and he seemed a bit taken aback at first, at a loss of what to say to me. I suspect he did not know anyone else who was going to the March. But he then asked me what I hoped to accomplish by going and I told him my health insurance story from when my son was born prematurely and we had to impoverish ourselves to qualify for Medicaid for him. I told him how important universal health insurance was to our country in helping reduce costs for business and keeping our people healthy and productive. I think he listened to me, and I hope to this day that he remembers that conversation whenever someone talks to him about restricting health insurance. It was a civil conversation between two people coming from very different points along the political spectrum. I wish we were able to have more of those conversations across our differences in today’s political climate. We are all in this society together, dependent on each other in so many ways. We have to learn how to talk to one another and really listen so we can work together toward the common good.

When I got to Sandy’s house in DC, she had tickets for the new African American Museum of History and Culture, so I met up with my friend, Michel Coconis (long-time social work activist and teacher who was also in town for the March), and we walked through as much of the museum as we could. We focused our time on the powerful history portion, and we both realized how little of our history we even know. It certainly was not taught in the schools we attended. When we came to the Obama exhibit at the end, I cried a bit at what we have lost. We exchanged comments with those around us about how much we will miss President Obama and his family. It seemed fitting somehow that we were saying goodbye to the Obama administration as we got ready to protest the Trump administration on the day following his inauguration.

On Inauguration Day, Laurie and I steered clear of the Mall and wore our pink pussy hats that I had knitted as we walked down to the National Geographic Museum where we had multiple, positive interactions—thumbs up from passing police cars, actual conversations with other marchers at intersections, and even a long conversation with a man in a pink hat in Whole Foods, where we stopped on the way back to Sandy’s house. When I went back to where the man was to get more wine, he chatted with me again and took a picture of me with his wife. The pink hats were a sign of solidarity with positive, progressive thinking, and they opened conversations with many strangers along the sidewalks. We saw one confrontation with police down the street, but did not venture near. The streets were fairly empty overall, nothing like they were the next day as the Women’s March dispersed. The aerial pictures of Trump’s inauguration compared to Obama’s and compared to our March tell the story. Social media will keep the lies about crowd size from taking hold.

We were up early on the day of the March to eat a hearty breakfast before we set out for the Mall. We had all read the instructions about high security and what would be allowed and what would not be allowed on the March; we planned accordingly. As it turned out, with the flow of

humanity toward the Mall, there was no way any security could have handled the crowd efficiently, so we just walked onto the Mall as you would any day of the week. There was no security in sight, no police, no official looking people. At first I was a little apprehensive as I feared counter-protesters, but those fears were without merit. With Sandy guiding our group of about 10, we tried to get close to the center of activity. We never made it. Instead we just joined into the positive flow of people in pink hats marching for women's rights, human rights, environmental rights, voting rights, their signs telling their individual stories. Such a fabulously positive event with people smiling, singing, helping each other over walls, finding each other in the crowd of half a million people, taking turns, talking with strangers and friends alike and taking pictures of each other with our signs. Even the children on the March were happy and content. A few people carried instruments and we even marched for a while with a very informal band playing patriotic songs. And the signs—the creativity and the humor of the signs—many of which were left at the White House and at Trump's hotel as memorials, standing witness to what had happened, reading "We are here and we are not going quietly into the night." Most of the signs were homemade like mine, with our own thoughts, issues, and concerns and our own sense of humor. The diversity and creativity were truly inspiring.

We never got close to the stage or even to a large screen—there were so many people—but we were not frustrated because it was just important to BE there, bearing witness, adding our bodies to the growing total—a sea of pink hats, all different sizes, shapes, colors, styles —moving slowly or even stopped. Everyone was so polite. There was no shoving or pushing or selfishness or disrespect. It was all, "No, you go first. I insist." At one point when we were not making any forward progress toward the starting point of the March that was to go to the White House, Sandy led us in a diagonal to the March route. It seemed as if several thousand other people had the same idea at the same time, so we had a mini-march to the March, singing, clapping, chanting, and smiling. It was the most polite and peaceful march I have even been on, but we were not quiet. We chanted chants from the Occupy Movement: "This is what democracy looks like!" from Black Lives Matter, and from pro-choice rallies, "Our bodies, our choice!" We even did a sort of wave ROAR that would come around a corner and move forward.

There were only two confrontation points that I experienced. First, in the middle of the flow of people and to one side, there were anti-choice protesters who started yelling at us and that confrontation turned into a shouting match between the two sides before we moved on. The other confrontation was as the March was dispersing into the DC streets. We passed a flatbed truck with a pro-Trump display including some supporters that was trying to back into the street where all the Marchers were walking peacefully. The shouting became pretty ugly quickly so we left the area, walking toward Sandy's house. We turned back to see the flatbed truck getting a police escort away from the feared pink pussy hats.

Throughout the March, we stayed together in our little group of 10 or so, sometimes having to wait for Laurie who had gone off to get yet another picture of a sign; she did get some pretty amazing photos. We were out from about 9:00 a.m. to about 4:00 p.m. When we got back to Sandy's house, we heated up the big pot of chili we had made the day before. Around her big dining room table, we ate chili and salad accompanied by copious wine and laughter as we shared our stories with the house of 15, plus some extra folks who dropped by—wonderful

camaraderie and a sense of togetherness with people from all over the country: young, old, gay, straight, black, white - this is what America looks like!



Byers and her sister, Laurie, on inauguration day

As I write this, we are now getting ready to march again. I will not be flying to DC this time, but I will participate in a march planned for Indianapolis on January 20 to mark one year. What have I been doing since the march a year ago? Sometime shortly after the election in 2016, one of my social work friends, Jean Capler, and I were having breakfast or lunch when we decided we had to DO something, that as social workers we could not just sit by and let what felt like a Trump wave roll over us. We had to act on our Code of Ethics and organize and advocate for social justice. Jean had been very involved in the fight for gay marriage here in Indiana, among other causes that we shared. Out of that discussion emerged the idea of forming a “secret” Facebook page to support advocates working to advance a broad array of progressive issues.

We had a call-out meeting December 14, and 51 people came with another 50, giving us detailed reasons why they were unable to attend: family in the hospital, children’s recitals, and such. About a week later, Call to Action launched our Facebook page and we now have over 1,300 members. We focus our action alerts on state and national issues and also provide support for each other when we are feeling discouraged about the battles we must wage. We have sponsored a training on how to talk with your elected official and co-sponsored several rallies, including several die-ins to protest the effort to repeal the ACA.

We have participated in a number of local protests, including a vigil and rally following the death of a participant in the Charlottesville events. Our page has posted many alerts and we know that our members are calling and emailing their federal and state legislators as they post comments about how their calls are received and what the positions of legislators are on various issues. The page has a great deal of activity, which gives us hope that many people are engaged. One woman about my age at the training on contacting your legislators said it was the first time she had written to her legislator. I encouraged her to write more as she learned that it really was not that hard. Many of us will be attending the January 20th March.

I turned 72 in the fall of 2017 with little to celebrate on the political front, much to worry about with a Trump presidency, and a recommitment to organizing and social action. I was first a social work student in the late 60s and I feel as if I have come full circle. I must advocate again for voting rights, for civil rights, for women's rights, for marriage rights, for free speech, and on and on. As my mother, also a social worker, would say, "There is no rest for the weary." We must keep on keepin' on. This is not the retirement I signed up for. But I will continue my efforts to fight for what is right. And I hope that many reading this short reflection will do so as well.

The rise of an autocracy in our government scares me and I want to be able to say that I did everything I could to stop it and reverse it with the election of a new Congress that will stand up to this president who would take away so much that we, as social workers, have fought for. The 2018 midterm elections are just around the corner and it is imperative that social workers become involved. If we believe in empowerment for our clients, we cannot forget their political empowerment as we assist in empowerment in other areas. We need to make sure that we help clients, co-workers, and the general public get registered to vote.

Your local League of Women Voters can help you develop a nonpartisan voter registration campaign for your agency or practicum site. You can learn how to register voters by using the resources available at: Voting is Social Work (<http://www.votingissocialwork.org>), a site developed by the collaboration of the Nancy A. Humphreys Institute for Political Social Work (<https://ssw.uconn.edu/our-community/centers-institutes-projects/nancy-a-humphreys-institute-for-political-social-work/>); the Congressional Research Institute for Social Work and Policy (<http://crispinc.org>); and Influencing Social Policy (<http://influencingsocialpolicy.org/>), and funded by the Fund for Social Policy Education and Practice at the New York Community Trust. The site has lots of practical suggestions for those interested in voter empowerment, and folks at the Humphreys Institute are most willing to help you develop initiatives in this area.

Get Out the Vote efforts will be critical in this next election to make sure that the voice of the people is really reflected in the vote. Voter registration is only the first step in the process. Helping clients understand the rules for voting in your state, and the times and places, is part of voter empowerment and is non-partisan in nature. Most importantly, helping clients understand how they can become informed about the candidates and their positions is imperative in voter empowerment. Publicizing candidate forums, holding a forum at your agency, and inviting all the candidates to visit your agency and learn about its services are all educational opportunities that can have great benefits. These activities, again, are nonpartisan.

Throughout this year, I have realized my role as a “doer” not a leader. For most of my professional life, I was a leader: social worker to administrator in delivering services to families; social work faculty member to a BSW program director; member of boards of directors to president of boards. Now, in retirement, I am happy to take on more of the role of a “doer,” a follower. I still initiate actions like Call to Action or Voter Empowerment, but they are always initiated in collaboration with others. I find I do not need the accolades that sometimes come with leadership. I am content to see others honored, others who may have been my students, others I have encouraged to assume leadership. This resistance of which so many of us are a part takes many leaders and many followers to be successful. I am happy that I am able to play my own small role to move our work forward.

We will march again in January, but we have a great deal of work to do yet this year, beyond marches, protests, and calls to our elected officials. There is the very real work of voter empowerment that lies ahead. I hope that social workers seize this opportunity to stand up and stand with our clients and colleagues and engage in the political process. I hope that more social workers run for office themselves so that social work values will be at the table in the political process. Our voices must be heard on issues of social justice. Remember what my mother said, “There is no rest for the weary.” We must encourage each other as we fight to move social justice issues back to the fore. I hope that you will join in this fight and contribute what you can.

References

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