



GIA MILLER PHOTO

Walkers at the start of the march last Saturday in Commuter Lot 3 in Katonah.

Hundreds join Solidarity Walk in community show of support

By GIA MILLER

In the wake of a divisive national election that sparked reports of harassment in local schools, more than 500 people gathered in Katonah last Saturday, Nov. 19, to take a stand for social justice and participate in a Solidarity Walk through town.

Participants assembled in commuter Lot 3 on Woods Bridge Road at 2 p.m. and, with the assistance of the local police, marched down Katonah Avenue. The procession ended at First Presbyterian Church of Katonah, where marchers listened to speakers, sang songs and learned about ways to get involved in local community organizations.

Emma Cabaness, a co-organizer of the event, described the walk as an opportunity to bring the community together.

"This was a galvanizing event for a lot of people, and it was a great way for neighbors to connect," she explained. "Many saw faces that they didn't recognize as part of their everyday lives, but it made a statement of who our community really is. I think our community is diverse and it was great to have our diversity supported."

Ms. Cabaness explained that the walk served as a platform for

newest community members to become involved, and for longtime residents to become more active in issues that affect their friends and neighbors.

Planning for the Solidarity Walk began days after the election. "As things began to unfold in our local school district on the Wednesday and Thursday after the election, and the hate crimes began to build up in the press, I felt compelled to do something here as a community," said Erika Pierce, the walk's main organizer. "I feel strongly that we can, are, and should be stronger and better than the world around us."

Ms. Pierce wanted to organize community members quickly. She posted an announcement on Facebook, calling a meeting for Sunday afternoon, Nov. 13. She expected to have a turnout of a dozen or so people who would form an organizing committee. Eighty-five people showed up.

In the coming days, Ms. Pierce and her committee worked closely with the Town of Bedford and local clergy to create a peaceful demonstration that was designed to unify the community and heal some of the post-election anxiety felt by minorities and marginalized

groups.

"The walk was incredibly important as we try to find ways to integrate the community and unite everyone," said Carola Otero Bracco, executive director of Neighbors Link. "We must realize the extent in which we all do believe in unity and in integration, and now we need to mobilize and keep the momentum going."

Ms. Bracco explained that during the past few weeks, program participants at Neighbors Link have experienced "an avalanche of hurt" and were fearful for their families and unsure what is to come. Looking forward, she expressed hope that the anxiety and uncertainty will mobilize people to work together for unity and inclusion.

Throughout the walk, neighbors spoke and explained their individual reasons for participating. Their "whys" ranged from direct personal experience and supporting friends, to uncertainties about future policies on immigration and other issues.

Kazuhiko, a 16-year-old who attends the Clear View School in Briarcliff Manor, explained that as a child he had to switch schools numerous times due to bullying. "I

continued on page 11

Solidarity Walk draws show of support

continued from page 1

have been bullied just for being me and for things that I couldn't change," he explained. "After the election, I felt pretty awful and I want to do more to help people like me, who are minorities. Not everyone is the same and that's OK. I want to help people understand that it is OK not to be like everyone."

"This is a fantastic way to tell people that we aren't going to take hatred lying down," said Ella Folger, a sophomore at John Jay High School. "To be human is to feel, and the moment those feelings are violated is when something has gone too far."

"Peaceful demonstrations are an important part of the democratic process," explained Christina Rae, who walked with her mom, Linda. "In order to preserve the democratic process, we have to stay involved."

Protecting the civil rights of minorities was a strong message heard during the walk. Many participants held signs with statements such as "I stand with Native Americans," "I walk with the LGBTQ community" or "I walk with my Muslim brothers and sisters." They voiced concerns over recent threats and acts of violence, and expressed their desire to live in a diverse community and country.

"We are here today to show that in America we are great when we are together," explained Dr. Mahjabeen Hassan, a Muslim-American who is the chairperson of the American Muslim Women's Association. "If we start fighting between us and hatred begins, that will lower us. It will not make us great again. We are great now and we want to stay great."

Dr. Hassan, who spoke in front of the Presbyterian Church at the end of the walk, voiced concern regarding the concept of a national Muslim registry. "I became a citizen of this country because of its principles and its constitution, and now we are talking about a registration?" she asked.

Other speakers included the Rev. Merle McJunkin of Antioch Baptist Church in Bedford Hills, Ms. Bracco and Rabbi Jason Nevarez of Temple Shaaray Tefila in Bedford Corners. Paul Storfer led the group in two songs, "Common Thread" and "This Land is Your Land."

"This is a wake-up call for us today, for us to get to know our neighbors around us," Rabbi Nevarez said during his speech. "It is now that we stand on our feet and that we do the footwork necessary to provide the liberties and justices that we know we are owed as U.S. citizens and as a democracy."

However, not everyone shared the marchers' views of the Solidarity Walk as an effective path toward combatting harassment and injustice. One community member, a Katonah resident, said a more effective strategy would be to confront acts of bigotry when they occur.

"Ask a minority what would be helpful to them, and act immediately when you see rac-



GIA MILLER PHOTO

Marga Spiller, Dr. Mahjabeen Hassan and Anjum Ansari, carrying signs in German and Arabic proclaiming support for immigrants and refugees.



JEFF MORRIS PHOTO

Marchers gathered in front of the First Presbyterian Church for songs and speeches.

ism or oppression," said the resident, who is a member of a minority and asked that his name be withheld. "When we joke about our racist or crazy relative or co-worker but don't approach them, we allow the behavior to exist. We cannot be passive about it; you must say something to make it right."

Rev. McJunkin also called for continued citizen action. "Justice for some is not true justice," he explained during his speech. "It must be justice for everyone. It must be freedom for everyone. It must be liberty for everyone."

At the conclusion of the walk and speeches, several local organizations set up tables and offered information on how community members could become involved. Volunteers accepted donations for the Community Center of Northern Westchester's food pantry.

According to Ms. Pierce, her team has begun working on future nonpartisan programs to foster community unity. She is speaking with the local chapter of the American Muslim Women's Association to create a community-wide potluck dinner.