

## BLM Student Story

Headline: Students Organize in Support of Black Lives Matter



Whittier College’s United Indigenous Peoples and Nations Club (UPIN) is supporting Black Lives Matter (BLM) by organizing local demonstrations.

“Alright, for those of you that are going to be at the protest tomorrow, there’s going to be a cop presence,” said UIPN member Adonnis Rivera ’21 in an Instagram Story leading up to the June demonstration in Norwalk he helped organize. “We have to be one. Everyone has to be calm and cool, alright? We’re going to get through this together.”

The well-attended protest began on a hot afternoon in front of Norwalk City Hall. The UIPN—a club started in 2019 to raise the visibility of indigenous and Native American students and culture at Whittier—pitched a tent on the lawn and were playing music and passing out water to community members waving signs and speaking their minds.

The day before the protest, Rivera and co-organizer Marline Terry, a senior at Norwalk High School, had met with Deputy City Manager Richard A. Rojas Jr. and Director of Public Safety Grissel Chaves to discuss their plans. Terry tried to organize the protest for the previous weekend, but had to postpone it.

“I reached out to her via Instagram to see why the protest was postponed and she responded that she ‘didn’t have enough resources or an organizing body’ to help set up and keep the participants safe,” Rivera said. “That’s where I came in—to help with resources, motivation, and provide structure along with leadership.”

Part of the support Rivera and the UIPN offered was in the form of social media marketing, which Rivera believes is where most activism is done. The online flyers for the protest featured an image of George Floyd encircled by various BLM imagery, with important information about social distancing and what to bring to the protest (e.g. megaphones, masks, and “most importantly, bring positive and strong energy”). The flyers also named the demonstration a “Peaceful Protest.”

“The BLM movement has been plagued by those who feel the need to express their emotions through the act of looting and violence,” said UIPN member Ray Roberson ’20. “While those who partake in such demonstrations may in fact be fed up and I empathize with them, our goal as UIPN is to promote community and garner safety amongst us all.”

For Roberson, empathy is key to leadership and change. In his speech upon being selected as Whittier’s Presidential Scholar Athlete of the Year, he quoted Maya Angelou: “People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” Roberson hopes the protests motivate people to act on behalf of their good nature by driving them into thought and making them feel empathy for others.

Organizing a peaceful protest may have done exactly that by showing the community an example of support for BLM separated from the images of violence that populated news coverage shortly after Floyd’s death. According to Rivera, demonstrating peacefully was necessary to move past local government policies and procedures so that, “Norwalk could see a protest that demonstrates the defiant power of the people, along with providing the media the opportunity to use a positive story.”

For Gracie Aragon ’20, a UIPN member and Gates Millenium Scholar, the peaceful demonstrations the club is helping organize are meant to change the narrative that minorities and people of color are “threatening” or “dangerous.”

“These false narratives are harmful and not only dehumanize [people of color], but also make our advocacy efforts harder to pursue,” she said. “The stories we tell about each other influence the stories we see in ourselves, so dominant negative narratives of people of color who want change restrict how modern-day America perceives our potential and limit their expectations of us.”

Some commentators have said the country is battling two viruses right now: COVID-19 and racism. While Aragon emphasized that the UIPN takes every measure to avoid the spread of the virus, she pointed out that America’s rate of police brutality exceeds that of any other Western democracy.

“Since the creation of law enforcement, American policing has always been racially biased against [people of color], and in many sectors of America, we can see how policy has been implemented based on racial profiling,” she added. “A lot of White Americans are angry at the fact that there are protests occurring in every single state in America. Don’t be mad because you don’t have a movement, be happy that you don’t need one.”