

CHAUVIN TRIAL

Street navigators aim to mediate between protesters and police during Derek Chauvin trial in Minneapolis

Volunteers seek to smooth tensions on street as Chauvin goes to court

By Nicole Norfleet (<https://www.startribune.com/nicole-norfleet/6370611/>) Star Tribune |

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For three nights in a row, Scott Anderson sat with the parents of a 14-year-old boy who was gunned down and killed in south Minneapolis (<https://www.startribune.com/minneapolis-shooting-victim-was-14-year-old-boy/600033226/?refresh=true>). He placed wood into a traditional Native American spirit fire meant to guide the teenager's spirit and consoled the father as best he could.

"He just saw his youngest son die, and I told him I only have one son and I have no idea what that feels like," Anderson said. "We sat and we talked and we cried, and I prayed with him."

Anderson is part of a network of men and women across the Twin Cities who offer support to residents experiencing violence and other emergencies. But during the trial of Derek Chauvin, the group members will focus on smoothing tensions between protesters and police before situations escalate.

Dubbed "navigators," they are members of nonprofits and charity groups, and many of them have grown up in the neighborhoods they assist. Some have experienced violence themselves. Some have worked within law enforcement, trying to quell unrest for years. Now, with the backing of the YMCA, the navigators hope they can keep their communities safe during the trial and into the future.

"I think a lot of it has to be about how to bring the village back," said the Rev. Jermaine Jones, one of several ministers who are part of the God Squad, a grassroots group often found on the streets of St. Paul working with community members as well as police.

Many older street pacifists talk about a time when they were young and community members wouldn't be afraid to discipline one another's children and make sure disagreements between neighbors didn't get out of hand. In similar fashion, group leaders believe the "village" approach can help temper hostilities that have surfaced on the streets of the Twin Cities since the death of George Floyd, whom Chauvin is charged with murdering.

"We are all doing the work," said the Rev. Darryl Spence, one of the leaders of the God Squad and an associate minister at New Hope Baptist Church.

The navigators are working under the umbrella of Minnesota Safe Streets, a coalition focused on "providing boots on the ground and coordinating efforts with local law enforcement agencies to reduce violence and create safe, thriving neighborhoods."

About 30 navigators have trained to deploy to different parts of the metro area with groups including the God Squad and others. Some will be paid by their organizations.

The program, which will be supported by the YMCA of the North, promises to deliver response teams if riots break out during or after the trial. As opening statements begin Monday, navigators plan to act as a buffer between demonstrators and police at protests, hoping to prevent the clashes that erupted last summer. They also hope to help dispel misinformation, which can run rampant on social media and incite unrest.

"They will talk to us a lot faster than a gun and a badge," said Anderson, who with a half-dozen other navigators filed out of a church in north Minneapolis one recent afternoon, preparing to door-knock to give out COVID-19 masks and encourage people to remain peaceful.

GALLERY

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"navigators" throughout the Twin Cities to serve as buffers between the police and community members during the Chauvin trial.

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Dressed in black and pink jackets and sweatshirts, the group from A Mother's Love helps families of those who have been killed in violence. Anderson said he hopes the group's familiar, welcoming faces will help the public respond positively during interventions.

DJ Young, a worker with A Mother's Love, swiftly walked house to house as he handed out masks and talked about peace. At 21, Young said, a few years ago he would have thought such efforts to spread positivity were useless. But as he started to work with A Mother's Love and saw the difference the group can make, he changed his mind.

"It wouldn't really matter if I was getting paid or not," he said.

After the riots last summer, when businesses including grocery stores were damaged and forced to close, the group also worked to help feed people with donations and food drives.

"We want to keep the peace so we don't lose any more businesses," said DonEsther Morris, program director at A Mother's Love. "We've lost too much."

Miki Lewis-Frost, another navigator, has focused on de-escalation for years. At the end of 2019, he opened the 8218 Truce Center at the corner of Lexington Parkway and Selby Avenue in St. Paul to provide a safe space for youth to hang out and learn. He mentors children and teenagers, from ages 8 to 18, and provides lessons on conflict resolution, entrepreneurship, health and wellness and more. He also mediates disagreements between teenagers that can often start at school.

The walls of the center feature masks from different regions of Africa, pictures of famous Black newsmakers as well as replicas of signs used to segregate facilities during the days of Jim Crow. Another wall is filled with pictures of young people who have died due to violence or drug addiction. Lewis-Frost said he directs teens to reflect on their lives near that wall.

"I just don't want a repeat of what happened some months back," he said of the riots. "I just think that if this verdict is not a guilty verdict, there's going to be a lot of hurt people and there's going to be a lot of anger, and I just want to defuse them."



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