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In Boston, displays of solidarity for Martin family

By **Jeremy C. Fox, Alyssa Botelho and Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENTS JULY 15, 2013

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 PHOTOS

 COMMENTS (15)



YOON S. BYUN/GLOBE STAFF

Cathy Guild of Roxbury honored the memory of Trayvon Martin in Dudley Square.

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Youth minister Willie Bodrick II strode to the pulpit of Twelfth Baptist Church in Roxbury on Sunday morning wearing a maroon hoodie.

“You know that I like to wear nice ties and nice suits but . . . I wear this hoodie in solidarity,” he said. “This hoodie today is my robe, because I am that little black boy. We are all that little black boy.”

Hours after Bodrick and other ministers called for peace and healing following the not-guilty verdict in the

shooting death of African-American teen Trayvon Martin, a protest in Dudley Square drew hundreds, some wearing hoodies and carrying homemade signs. More than two dozen speakers forcefully expressed their frustration with the verdict and with wider issues of inequality.

On Saturday, jurors exonerated George Zimmerman, the Florida neighborhood watch volunteer who last year killed Martin, who was unarmed and wearing a hooded sweatshirt.

At Twelfth Baptist, Bodrick, 25, urged the congregation to pray not only for Martin's family but for Zimmerman's. He asked that they pray, too, for a change in perceptions.

"Black men in the 'hood . . . should not be perceived as a threat, but as a treasure," he said.

Bodrick said later that he had prepared his sermon a week ago, but after hearing the verdict Saturday, he felt his message needed a new preface.

"There are so many instances in my life when I could have been [Martin], and I have had so many friends killed [by] violence," he said. "I had to speak. I couldn't just let the elephant sit in a room of justice, love, and peace."

Zimmerman's attorneys argued that he shot Martin in self-defense and that the teen had knocked the volunteer down, punched him, and slammed his head against the sidewalk.

But many believed Zimmerman singled out Martin because of his youth and race, sparking a vigorous public debate about race relations and stereotypes of young African-American men.

A jury of six women in Sanford, Fla., found Zimmerman not guilty of second-degree murder or the lesser charge of manslaughter.

Protests broke out Saturday night in several cities, including one in Oakland, Calif., where protesters broke windows and set small fires, according to reports.

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Willie Bodrick II spoke about the verdict at Twelfth Baptist Church in Roxbury.

At Morning Star Baptist Church in Mattapan, Bishop John M. Borders III told the congregation they should not be bitter about the verdict.

“We should protest, but not violently,” he said.

Borders spoke out against an aspect of American culture that he said embraces violence over virtue.

“We are arming ourselves in America in the wrong direction,” Borders said. “Instead of arming ourselves with more guns in this country and passing laws that support that, we should arm ourselves with the things that really last — with the truth, with mercy, with justice, with righteousness.”

On Sunday evening, close to 500 people of all races and ages gathered peacefully in a park in Roxbury’s Dudley Square to protest the verdict and show support for Martin’s family.

Milton resident Maya Jean said the verdict was “disgusting, but not surprising,” as she held a sign she had made that said, “A system cannot fail those it was never built to protect.”

Jean, 17, who attended the protest alone, said she came because she felt the verdict was one in a long line of injustices. “This trial was another slap in the face to black Americans in this country,” she said.

But, she added, “I hope this is the slap in the face that wakes this country up.”

Protesters carried dozens of other handmade signs, some bearing photographs of Martin wearing a hoodie. Some signs read: “Justice for Trayvon,” “Say no to racism,” and “What if he was your son?”

A tree in the park was surrounded with teddy bears, roses, and close to 50 candles illuminated to honor Martin. About a half-dozen uniformed Boston police stood on the edge of the crowd.

Boston firefighter Oscar Francisco, 47, contrasted the Zimmerman verdict with the high-profile legal case of an NFL football star.

“Michael Vick got two or three years [in prison] for killing a dog,” Francisco said. “Zimmerman murdered a

human being and is walking free. Where is the justice?"

Malden resident Sofia Arias, 25, worried the verdict could put others in danger.

"Zimmerman's walking free has emboldened racial vigilantes everywhere," she said.

A series of passionate speakers addressed the crowd, some describing their own struggles with the judicial system.

Others recited poetry or described what they called historical and structural injustices that keep African-American citizens on an unequal footing with their white neighbors.

"This has never been a democracy for us," Khury Petersen-Smith, 31, of Dorchester, told the crowd. "This is not the dream [for which Martin Luther King Jr. fought]. This is Malcolm X's worst nightmare."

During the rally, the crowd repeatedly chanted, "No justice, no peace," at each break in the series of speakers, which included local politicians and community leaders.

City Councilor Charles Yancey of Boston led the crowd in a moment of silence followed by the chant, "We are Trayvon Martin."

"We have the power and the responsibility to challenge racism, sexism, and homophobia — all forms of abuse," Yancey said.

State Representative Gloria Fox, a Roxbury Democrat, told protesters that the fight for racial equality is just beginning.

Following the rally, the crowd swelled as protesters marched up Malcolm X Boulevard to Ruggles Station, shouting slogans including, "Protect and serve, that's a lie, you don't care if black kids die," as cars beeped in support.

Sunday morning, outside Morning Star Baptist Church, congregants expressed frustration with the verdict, but were not shocked.

"It was a crying shame," said Julian Epps, 61, who lives in Quincy.

Epps was troubled by attempts by some to suggest that Martin, who tested positive for marijuana use after his death, somehow invited Zimmerman's scrutiny.

"Even if he was a gangbanger, the kid was minding his own business," Epps said. "He was going home. He had Skittles on him; he had candy."

Epps said, though, that he would not harbor feelings of anger. “I forgive the guy,” he said of Zimmerman. “He’s got to live with it.”

Mattapan resident Arleta Faulkner, a teacher at the Curley K-8 School in Jamaica Plain, said she understood the desire of Zimmerman, the son of a white father and a Hispanic mother, to protect his home and his community but suspected he singled out Martin because of his race.

“My mom always said an African-American male is automatically born with one strike against [him] in this country . . . and if you ask me, that sort of proves it,” Faulkner said.

Faulkner and other parishioners expressed concern about Florida’s “stand your ground” law, which permits a person fearing great physical harm or death to use lethal force and gives that person the benefit of the doubt in court, even if the circumstances would allow the person to flee.

“There should have been some penalty for [Zimmerman]. That’s telling people in Florida with that law that it’s OK to kill someone because he hit you or he approached you.”

Sue Guerrier, 23, of Roslindale, questioned the law and said if Martin had been white and Zimmerman black, she had no doubt the jury would have reached a guilty verdict.

She said the jury’s decision was painful to accept.

“I’m not even a mom, and my heart hurts,” said Guerrier. “A life is a life — white, black, Hispanic, whatever — and he didn’t deserve that.”

Jeremy C. Fox can be reached at jeremy.fox@globe.com. Alyssa A. Botelho can be reached at alyssa.botelho@globe.com. Matt Rocheleau can be reached at matthew.rocheleau@globe.com.

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