

# Tacoma rally promotes discussion following George Zimmerman verdict

Published: July 20, 2013

By ADAM ASHTON — Staff writer



After removing his suit coat, Pierce County Superior Court Judge Frank Cuthbertson puts on a hoodie, holds up a copy of the U.S. Constitution and shouts, "this is not probable cause," during a forum, organized by the Urban League and Pierce County Black Collective, at Shiloh Baptist Church, in Tacoma, Saturday, July 20, 2013.

JANET JENSEN — Staff photographer

Pierce County Superior Court Judge Frank Cuthbertson stood before a crowded Tacoma church Saturday as he dropped his suit coat and peeled back his shirt sleeves to reveal his black forearms.

"This is not probable cause," he declared, pointing to his skin and referring to the legal standard he considers when police present him with evidence seeking a warrant.

He reached down and lifted a gray hooded sweatshirt. Recognizing the hoodie as a symbol for the death of black Florida teenager Trayvon Martin, the audience stood and roared as Cuthbertson pulled it over his head.

"This is not probable cause!" he shouted.

His imagery captured the feelings of more than 200 people who joined him Saturday at Shiloh Baptist Church to mourn Martin's passing and vent their outrage that his killer,

neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman, would not face time in prison for slaying the teenager in February 2012.

The forum, organized by the Tacoma Urban League and Pierce County Black Collective, was one of dozens of events across the country Saturday that focused attention on racial profiling and the fates of blacks in the criminal justice system in the wake of the not-guilty verdict Zimmerman received last week from a Florida jury.

The killing has been a touchstone in discussions about race for more than a year. President Barack Obama has acknowledged as much in his statements about Martin's killing.

"Trayvon Martin could have been me 35 years ago," he said Friday.

Zimmerman asserted that he was defending himself when he shot Martin during a confrontation with the teenager. The not-guilty verdict meant that jurors believed it was reasonable that Zimmerman, who identifies himself as Hispanic, shot Martin because Zimmerman believed his life was threatened.

At Shiloh, most of the participants in the forum shared a feeling that Zimmerman was guilty because he initiated the confrontation by following Martin, who was unarmed, as the 17-year-old walked home. They believed that at some level Zimmerman was suspicious of Martin because of the teenager's race and clothing.

"I'm just angry," said Marny Smith, 60, of Tacoma, who is white. "I have African American sons and I have the same fear" that they could be confronted and hurt because of someone's misperceptions about their appearances.

Organizers of the forum sought to turn some of the frustration people felt into common goals. They encouraged each other to register to vote, hold elected officials accountable for their votes, reach out to young people who might need mentors and talk about race openly, even if it makes others uncomfortable.

"In my mind, it inspires me that there is more work to be done" in advancing equality since the last era of major civil rights reforms, said Owen Lawson, 43, of Fircrest.

He brought his 12-year-old daughter, Nia, to the forum because he wanted her to learn about struggles for civil rights that persist in a country that elected its first black president five years ago.

"I love that her friends look like the rainbow," he said. "But she has a legacy she was born into" that Lawson wants her to understand. Her grandparents were civil rights activists.

Pierce County Sheriff Paul Pastor encouraged the mostly black audience to distinguish between uniformed law enforcement officers and "loose cannons" when they talk to their

children about interacting with police. He said Zimmerman's behavior would not be tolerated among the department's volunteers. He also said Pierce County neighborhood watch volunteers are not armed.

"We cannot afford to have a bunch of self-appointed, self-directed public safety officers" who are accountable to no one, Pastor said.

He praised the audience for making the Hilltop neighborhood a safer place over the past 20 years, but said there's more to be done.

"If you have a wonderful and happy impression that we are living in a post-racial world, then you are living under a rock," he said.

Cuthbertson, the judge, traced the disappointment many African Americans felt in the Zimmerman verdict to hundreds of years of history in which blacks did not receive justice equal to whites. He likened Zimmerman to someone in the early 20th century connecting a black person to a crime without evidence and initiating a lynching.

"He tried (Martin), he convicted him and he sentenced him in a very short period of time," Cuthbertson said.

That history shaped many of the reactions to the verdict that people shared Saturday.

"I was profoundly disappointed, and at the same time I was not surprised," said Tacoma Mayor Marilyn Strickland.

Airing those emotions coupled with the connections some of the participants helped some people leave the forum feeling better than when they went inside.

"I was upset and there was no way to release," said Kanisha Keal, 25. "Now you have these resources available that you didn't know were there. Before you felt helpless."

*Adam Ashton: 253-597-8646*

[Read more here: http://www.thenewstribune.com/2013/07/20/2687552/tacoma-rally-promotes-discussion.html#storylink=cpy](http://www.thenewstribune.com/2013/07/20/2687552/tacoma-rally-promotes-discussion.html#storylink=cpy)