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Spirit of family reunion marks Million Man March anniversary

By Jesse J. Holland

WASHINGTON (AP) - Black men and women joyously returned to the National Mall on Saturday for the 20th anniversary of the Million Man March, calling for changes in policing and in black communities amid an atmosphere almost like a family reunion.

Waving flags, carrying signs and listening to speeches and songs, people mingled as they wove their way through security barricades and around loudspeakers and souvenir vendors at the U.S. Capitol and down the Mall on a sunny, breezy day.

For some, it was a return to Washington after the Million Man March on Oct. 16, 1995, and a chance to expose their children to the same positive experience the first march represented to them.

"This is a very special moment for me. Twenty years ago, I was by myself," said Joey Davis, 47, of Detroit, who was setting up chairs for his family near the Capitol's reflecting pool. "And 20 years later, I come back with my wife and five children. And so I like to think that over the last 20 years I've been doing my part in keeping the promise of the spirit of the original Million Man March."

Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, who spearheaded the original march, called the anniversary gathering the "Justice or Else" march. Many speakers asked the crowd to chant that slogan during the day.



Min. Louis Farrakhan (The Final Call)

Farrakhan, in a wide-ranging speech that lasted for more than 2 hours, called for more responsibility in the black community for inner-city killings and for the government to investigate recent high-profile killings of unarmed African-American men and women.

"There must come a time when we say enough is enough," the 82-year-old Farrakhan said. Attention has been focused on the deaths of unarmed black men since the shootings of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in 2012 in Florida and 18-year-old Michael Brown in 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri. Deaths of unarmed black males at the hands of law enforcement officers have inspired protests under the "Black Lives Matter" moniker around the country.

Members of their families and the family of Sandra Bland, an African-American woman found hanged in a Texas jail after a traffic stop, spoke from the main stage.

The original march brought hundreds of thousands to Washington to pledge to improve their lives, their families and their communities. Women, whites and other minorities were not invited to the original march, but organizers welcomed all on Saturday.

President Barack Obama, who attended the first Million Man March, was in California on Saturday.

Saturday's march brought out young and old, including some veterans of the 1963 March on Washington. Nate Smith of Oakland, California, who was on the Mall for Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech and the 1995 Million Man March, returned once again for Saturday's proceedings.

"It's something that I need to do," the 70-year-old man said. "It's like a pilgrimage for me, and something I think all black people need to do."

The National Park Service estimated the attendance at the 1995 march to be around 400,000, but subsequent counts by private organizations put the number at 800,000 or higher. The National Park Service no longer provides crowd estimates on Mall activities.

Rev. Jamal Bryant of the Empowerment Temple AME Church in Baltimore, who helped organize the anniversary march, estimated there were almost 1 million attendees Saturday. Farrakhan refused to guess how many people filled the Mall from the Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial.

Life has improved in some ways for African-American men since the original march, but not in others. For example:

-The unemployment rate for African-American men in October 1995 was 8.1 percent, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. In September 2015 it was 8.9 percent.

-In 1995, 73.4 percent of African-American men had high school degrees. In 2004, 84.3 percent did, according to the Census Bureau.

-Law enforcement agencies made 3.5 million arrests of blacks in 1994, which was 30.9 percent of all arrests, the FBI said. (By comparison, they made 7.6 million arrests of whites that year, which was 16 percent of all arrests.) By 2013, the latest available data, African-American arrests had decreased to 2.5 million, 28 percent of all arrests.



College students representing the Black Student Unions were present at the 20th Anniversary Commemoration of the Million Man March. (Eric Muhammad/The Final Call)

Youth voices for justice rise at rally

By Janaih X Adams and Michael Z Muhammad
Special to the NNPA News Wire from The Final Call

WASHINGTON - The Justice or Else gathering held before hundreds of thousands of people on the National Mall Oct. 10 featured the voices of emerging new leadership in America. In fact, many said the overwhelming success of the gathering had the footprint of youth all over it.

"The core organization of the gathering was done through social media," observed Native American activist YoNasDa Lonewolf. "This Joshua generation is able to see through the falsehood and insincerity" demonstrated by some of the traditional and political leaders.

Ms. Lonewolf pointed out native Black Foot leader Gyassi Ross as an example, noting his bold declarations as part of the program where he called for a revisit to the racist Discovery Doctrine and Papal Bulls, governmental and religious declarations that helped to destroy Native people.

In fact, what was striking at the demonstration was the absence of traditional civil rights leaders. In their place were young leaders like Carmen Perez with the New York Justice League who voiced support for the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan's efforts during his organizing visit to New York.

What is great about this movement is its inclusiveness, Latino, black, Mexican, and native communities, she said. Her specific focus is to end the school-to-prison pipeline and her demand for justice for young people. She also credited her involvement to her Justice League colleague Tamika Mallory, another strong young voice that participated in the program.

"What we are witnessing today is a natural evolution in leadership, new voices that are not controlled and are clear," said Abel Muhammad, an emerging Latino leader in the Nation of Islam. "In the past, black leadership and leadership of people of color were largely controlled and sanctioned."

The diversity of the young audience participating in the rally

included not only Native and Latino faces, but also Asian, African, and the Caribbean. And despite the hue of their skin, many of them wore shirts that read, "Black Lives Matter," a movement that played an important role in the rally.

Sparked by the brutal murder of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman and further energized by the police murder of Michael Brown, the BLM movement has galvanized young people into active protest in a way that hasn't been seen in decades.

However, similar to circumstances that arise whenever voices appear that could unite blacks and people of color, the Black Lives Matter movement has been under fire lately due to a calculated campaign by conservative political forces to label the group as a "hate group."

In response, co-founder Opal Tometi tweeted: "These trolls & conservative media conglomerates are on one! Calling BLM a hate group is not only factually wrong, it's dangerous."

"To me, Black Lives Matter means black people are treated equally under the system," said Amanda Nelson, who rode the train from Maryland to get to the rally. "Not just the justice system, but every system in America the same as white people are treated. Too many are losing their lives."

Seventeen-year-old Darrell Davis from Ithaca, N.Y., attended with a group of friends from his high school wearing #BlackLivesMatter hoodies. They took three cars to travel from their home city to get to Washington.

"I'm not used to coming somewhere and seeing this many black people gathered, at least not for a good cause," young Davis said. "The sense of unity is really cool. I feel comfortable. Usually, going out in public, there's some sense of wanting to look around - Here, it's just a good sense of unity and it makes you want to go back home and just emphasize being one with what we need to do, because there's a bigger cause than us going against each other, really."

Davis' basketball coach took about 40 black boys and girls from their school to a conference

in Cleveland, Ohio. He recalls that when they came back, they were spreading the word about how awesome it was. So when his coach brought up going to the Million Man March anniversary, he was willing to go.

"My coach explained it as really historical and something you'd only see once," the teenager said. "We got our t-shirts, and just started really spreading the movement through New York. So a lot of people heard about it."

Students Ashia Evans, Braylin Rushton and Shienne Williams came from the Black Student Union at Youngstown State University (YSU) to unite with their people.

"We need the solidarity, man," Mr. Rushton said. "There's so many people that don't care and it's important that we form in a group of solidarity and stand against things that need to be changed. We're inheriting this -- we're inheriting all of this and next it goes on to our children

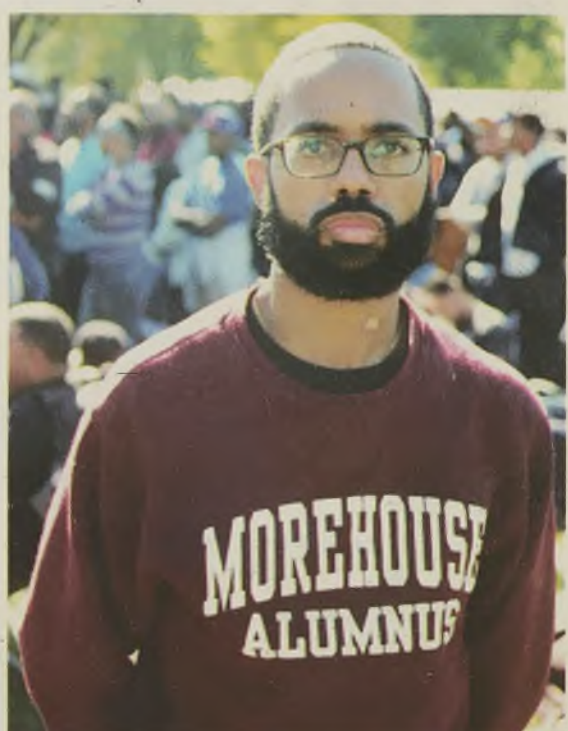
and so forth. We got to make a change somewhere."

These students are currently fighting against the school-to-prison pipeline in their city, which refers to policies and practices that push the most at-risk children out of the classroom and into the penitentiary.

"They're trying to shut down our public school system," said Shienne Williams, 20. "We can't let that happen."

Ms. Williams was among 20 YSU students who were able to travel by bus provided by the Muslim brotherhood in Youngstown, free of charge, because the chairperson of the African Studies Department got them funding.

"Today, we get some direction and some guidance," Ms. Williams said. "I feel like we've had a lot of separate movements going on, but Minister Farrakhan brings us all into one solid group where we can go back into our communities and make things happen."



Youth came from far and wide. (The Final Call)

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