

## **DC Peace Team and Meta Peace Team offer non-partisan UCP at the Republican National Convention**

July 17-18, 2016 in Cleveland, OH

I had the pleasure of working with the Meta Peace Team and other volunteers through the DC Peace Team offering non-partisan unarmed civilian peacekeeping at the RNC. Our mission was to 1) defuse hostility that might lead to direct violence and 2) to cultivate empathy between opposing persons or groups. The context of recent incidents of police killing black men and police being killed, as well as the broader political rhetoric created a very risky and potentially quite violent situation.

We formally offered UCP at three marches but also did informal empathy building during and outside of those events as we walked the streets. We were there to defuse hostility in and cultivate empathy for all parties involved, such as the protesters, RNC delegates, police, etc. We had a great team of 13 people from Michigan, DC, Vermont, and Wisconsin. We split up into four affinity teams and introduced ourselves to all stakeholders. Especially before, but also during marches we spoke with people to build some connection, trust and try to orient them towards empathy. Below are some examples of defusing hostility to prevent direct violence and cultivating empathy.

### *Defusing hostility to prevent direct violence*

As a protest march began, a police officer on a bike was moving along the yellow line on the street while the protesters marched in the street. He was continually using his back tire to bump a young African-American woman and saying "Get to the right!" She replied, "I hear you, I heard you," – becoming more and more anxious and irritated, though the officer kept bumping her. Immediately upon witnessing this exchange, I walked up to the two and caught the officer's eye. I put out my hand out to suggest the police officer stop, to which he rode off. The woman was able to regain her composure and return to the march.

Later, a white man in a car passing the marchers started to yell and gesture obscenely. The driver was traveling slowly, and so I stopped and faced the man. I looked at him without animosity but with an air of confidence and my arms to the side. The driver looked at me and stopped his obscene hand gesture. I then let the marchers all pass behind him while I faced the driver. The driver calmed down, stopped yelling, and just drove off. In both these instances, early interventions were successful in preventing the interactions from escalating into something more heated and potentially more violent.

### *Cultivating Empathy*

After brief introductions, I asked a young adult woman at a Stop Trump rally, what concerns you about Trump? She went on about racism, immigrants, fascism, etc. So, I asked, why do you think Trump supporters like him? She thought and said they think he's going to help them. I offered reflective listening by saying, so, they feel like they are suffering or not getting the access they would hope for. She said, yes. I asked, so, what do you think should change to help get their needs met? She thought for a moment and said the capitalistic system needs to change. I said, ok, but how would you explain how that would help to a white, rural, perhaps lower economic class

person? She replied, I could say how their labor and the limited wages are what contribute to the disproportional wealth of the 1%. Without indicating agreement or disagreement with her position, I affirmed her effort at thinking through that, i.e. her movement into empathy.

Three of us approached a group of Texas RNC delegates wearing Texas flags as shirts. One of my partners asked, what do you like about Trump? She replied that she actually began supporting Ben Carson, and then Ted Cruz. She went on to say that now she's willing to get behind Trump. My other partner asked about what issues does Trump support that resonate with you? She gave the example of illegal immigration and how they should follow our laws. So, my partner asked if she knew about how long it takes most immigrants to get into the U.S. following our laws. She didn't reply, so my partner said it often takes 10-20 years with our present laws. There was a slight pause by her and then my partner asked what we should do about that. She then shifted and said the immigration system is broken and we need some kind of "reform." The pause and the shift in thinking was a sign of deeper reflection and some initial steps toward more empathy.

In addition to these examples, a few other things happened worth noting. During one march downtown a police officer looking somewhat nervous and anxious asked us to help them by requesting a few protesters remove their masks. I said we appreciate your concern and asking us to help. But why can they not put a mask on? He said, "because they are more likely to do something." I said, we can build connection and relationship with them, and communicate with them about expressing their struggle without direct violence, but we won't suggest to them what to wear or not. The officer seemed a little surprised and moved on.

On the one hand, I think we should be open to communicating with police as some of our goals do overlap. On the other hand, I think we have to be careful about getting caught up in efforts of possessive control that take us away from connection and transforming the conflict. In comparison to the request for the kids to take off their masks, it's interesting to think about what some protesters may experience when they see lines of police wearing hard cased helmets around their whole head and chins, armor-like gear, and lethal weapons.

Another member of our team, Annette Thomas, reflected on an incident when she was bumped by a police vehicle. "It was quite comical in a sense that I was put to the test when the officer ran into me with his motorized vehicle and blamed me for not getting out of the way. It is amazing how powerful a request for and acceptance of an apology can be, and how quickly anger can be replaced with forgiveness."

There were also a few cases of protesters saying fairly mean things directly to a police officer. These were of course unfortunate and drew our attention for intervention when possible. The police officers in these moments usually did not visibly escalate the situation.

A couple takeaways from this experience include the following. First, there is obvious hunger for new ways to engage conflict as we experienced significant, persistent interest from press and participants. Second, there is a clear need for non-partisan, unarmed peacekeeping presence that focuses on empathy as much as defusing hostility. I hope we can all work toward

institutionalizing such efforts so more trained people are available for longer periods of times, but also to improve better pre-event coordination with stakeholders and better press follow up.

A deep thank you to my 12 other partners offering courageous, unarmed peacekeeping to offer a new way of engaging conflict that builds trust rather than continues the distrust, and defuses destructive conflict so we can practice constructive conflict to improve our relationships.

*Eli McCarthy*