The meaning of a vibrant public square

Alina Panek
Denison University

Powerful discourse at organized protests quiets the masses and pauses the passerby to hear what the speaker has to say. Black Student Union (BSU) member and University Residence Council (URC), Tamela Flowers shouted to the crowd, "I'm outraged and ashamed to be a URC member," the Head Resident of Curtis Hall said. The Denison University senior demanded action now, "What will happen," Flowers asked, "when I tell prospectives that you cannot be Black and proud at Denison?" (Harrington, 1988). The crowd's cheers rose to meet Flowers above and over the top where she stood from the podium. Like a rising crescendo, she drew one minute of roaring cheers for her provoking question. So many bodies on the grass that the quad is no longer artificial green, but a pastiche mix of earth toned colors as the community gathers around the person shouting from the flagpole.

I would like to think that the flagpole remembers. Like an elephant, I hope it holds decades of public memory of outrage, protest, and rejected harassment inside the aluminum tin of the base. The feeling of the hot sun that beats down on the crowd and the flag forever set in the layers of the metal. I hope that even though at the same time the next day the flagpole is alone, it still remembers when it came together to stand against hatred and injustice in the community. Braving the wind each morning, the flag greets the sun over the fleet of trees at the top of the hill. The waving flag mimics the fog that rolls in on the crisp October morning. It bows to those who have passed at half-mast.

The nipping wind chases commuters to hurry across campus. There are no traditions surrounding the flag on a college campus. It becomes something to pass by, to momentarily gaze, a pit stop for friends to meet. When enlisted in a mission, the flagpole is powerful. Activists with passion in their hearts have repeatedly chosen the flagpole to be their star destination when staging their protests.

The eerie silence of the forum as the audience waits for the next orator to stand behind the podium; hundreds of bodies all keep still to preserve the sanctity of the moment. There are important words being said. The thoughts that have been hidden behind doors, some never said

out loud, are being voiced. Dr. Desmond Hamlet, adviser to the BSU and English professor, proclaimed, "This incident shows a pathetic lack of awareness on the part of our community. We all must realize that racism is a form of violence."

The importance can be seen in how many community members stand and stay. There are layers to the crowd. The furthest are the curious, those who did not know that this was going to happen. The community can recognize that this is something out of the homogeneity of campus life. The devoted stand closer to the elocutionist stepping forward to hear every word that spills from their heart. The center are the people with the most passion, the organizers, the victimized, the ones who have been yearning to speak out into the world about their issues. A line forms behind the podium, real or imagined, as the discourse picks up.

When the climax approaches, the public speaker holds the silence and it beats through the audience in waves. Visceral, tangible emotion flies in the air carried on by whispers, gasps, and unsettled fidgeting; shifting feet as the perpetrators realize their role in the pain.

The next day it will be only the flag that still stands as a reminder of the emotion of the day before.