
A Frontline Report on Pro-Lifers in Atlanta
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Competing photos and accounts of the so-called Pro-Life Freedom Ride arriving here in Atlanta today will probably abound over the next several days, but here's a fresh report from the frontlines written about an hour after the events were over.

The activists who showed up for SisterSong, SPARK & SisterLove assembled in front of the King Center at approximately 2:30 pm. We were met by Park Police and a woman representing the Center who said because our permit had been denied to assemble, we could not use any part of the Center itself if we wanted to display signs, chant, or do any kind of "protesting activities." In fact, access to the interior of the grounds in which the tombs of Dr. & Mrs. King rest in the middle of a beautiful reflecting pool was blocked by barricades allegedly for "maintenance", which is not normally the case. It looks like she was aware that we were coming and ordered the Park Service to block access to the reflecting pool. We were told we could walk around the back of the pool, if we wished, and only if we did not use our signs, bullhorn, or pass out any literature.

She did offer, however, an amphitheatre directly across the street (with shade and seating) that is part of the MLK Park and Visitors' Center which we could use as we wished. But, she warned us, we could not cross back over the street when the anti's came at 4:00 or she "would have to call authorities." Presumably, she meant we would be arrested. She also asked us to carefully stay on our side of the street and promised that she would keep the anti's on their side because the King Center obviously did not want any direct confrontations between the two groups. She even warned us not to send photographers across the street or they would be "detained" as well.

Being no dummies, we decided to comply with the officials' request for several reasons. First of all, it was nearly 100 degrees out there in that hot Atlanta sun and the amphitheatre across the street had seats and was shaded, while most of the King Center itself is bereft of any shade. Second, she assured us that the anti's also would not be allowed to assemble at the King Center when their bus arrived, but would only be allowed to have a brief procession in front of the reflecting pools in which the crypts of Dr. & Mrs. King are kept. After which they would have to use the sidewalk opposite our sidewalk for whatever activities they wanted to have. Third, the amphitheatre allowed us to have a full rally, with speakers, signs, literature and chants – things we could not do at the King Center itself. So it felt like a win-win. If the King Center was willing to treat both sides fairly, then we would comply with their request that we move across the street.

At first, things appeared to be working out well. More than 50 supporters came from Project South, Advocates for Youth, Feminist Women's Health Center, the Malcolm X Movement, and of course, SPARK, SisterSong, and SisterLove. The folks were mostly African American, but a number of Latinas and some white activists came in solidarity. It was a decidedly young group, with only a few elders like me sitting back and watching them lead. We had a spirited rally for about an hour, with speeches and statements of solidarity, like from the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice.

Then the anti-abortionists' bus and cars pulled up in front of the King Center at 3:40 pm. The bus was decorated with signs proclaiming it was the "Pro-Life Freedom Bus." Obviously, a huge amount of money was spent on these theatrics.

Staying on our side of the street as they dis-embarked, we started chanting, “Trust Black Women” as loudly as we could, holding up signs that read “You Can’t Steal Civil Rights” and “Women’s Rights are Human Rights.” Paris Hatcher and Tonya Williams from SPARK, and Heidi Williamson of SisterSong, led the rally with spirit and energy that really excited our side and kept everyone engaged and having fun.

We were quite surprised when the anti’s piled off the bus – all but 4 of whom were white as far as we could tell! For a campaign organized by the African American Outreach Director for Priests for Life, Alveda King, it was surreal seeing all these white folks carrying signs that said “Abortion is the #1 Killer of Black America.” Can you imagine the optics of the scene? Here’s a group of white folks claiming to save Black babies being protested by mostly African American women and men who are shouting “Trust Black Women!”? Once we saw their signs, Paris instantly created a new chant: “Racism is the #1 Killer of Black America, not Black Women!”

The ironies of the day seemed endless – when was the last time Black folks protested at a white folks’ rally at the Center named after Dr. Martin Luther King? Generally we’re to be found protesting at all-white Klan rallies, so maybe it was not so strange after all, just the location was special. We also observed that Alveda King was not permitted to break the rules laid down for the groups any more than we were, and the anti’s were outraged by this. They became downright abusive towards the Park Police because they felt she had been insulted, so it was obvious that our tactic of cooperation was the much better choice.

They had approximately 100 people – probably twice our numbers, and they were mostly white and led by Father Pavone of Priests for Life. About 10 white women carried signs saying “I Regret My Abortion” as if that would impress someone. Two Black men, apparently Rev. Clennard Childress and possibly Rev. Stephen Broden (a Texas candidate for Congress) led the procession in order to be most visible for the cameras. So far, only Fox News has reported the story. Are we surprised?

After marching in front of the tombs and reassembling on the sidewalk until they were told to move on, the anti’s left their side of the street and walked around the back of our demonstration to hold their prayer service on the grass behind the amphitheatre where we were, possibly upon orders by the Park Police. Suddenly, there were no barriers, no police, nothing between the two groups! Again, we were surprised because we hadn’t gone over to their space – they came over to ours. At first, everyone kept their distance – we shouted, they sang; we held up signs, they held up their hands. You know, usual demonstration type of stuff. Then things got interesting when they decided to cross the invisible barrier and start praying over us. Things threatened to break out into a shoving match, until the Park Police providentially appeared and kept both sides apart.

It seemed a bit ridiculous when they started singing “We Shall Overcome” to counter our singing “Lift Ev’ry Voice.” Coincidentally, the Negro National Anthem was talked about extensively this morning on CNN as cynical pundits asked if it was still relevant to today’s struggle against racism. I believe we spontaneously answered the silly question for CNN by using it to drown out their appropriation of our legendary civil rights song.

Eventually, the heat of the day wore everyone out. They moved across the street again (not in front of the King Center) in order to finish their praying. We climbed to the top of the amphitheatre to look down on them to continue our chant, “Trust Black Women!” I think we frustrated them because I’m sure many of these white folks assumed the Black community of Atlanta would welcome them as saviors of the Black race. It was obvious they were more than a little uncomfortable at being shouted down by Black women. After about an hour and a half of this back and forth, they boarded their bus and left and so did we, but not without singing, “Nah, nah, nah, nah, nah, nah. Hey-Hey-Hey. Good-bye.”