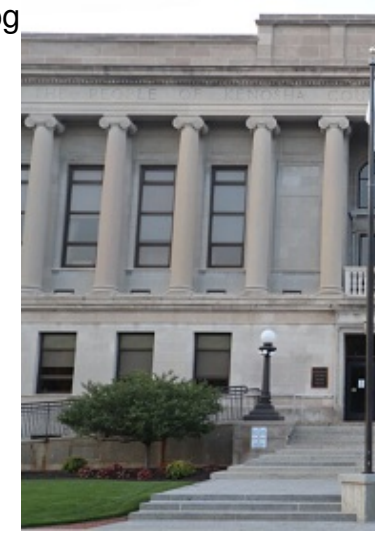
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Questions, trauma and vision linger two years after the Blake police shooting and the uprising that followed

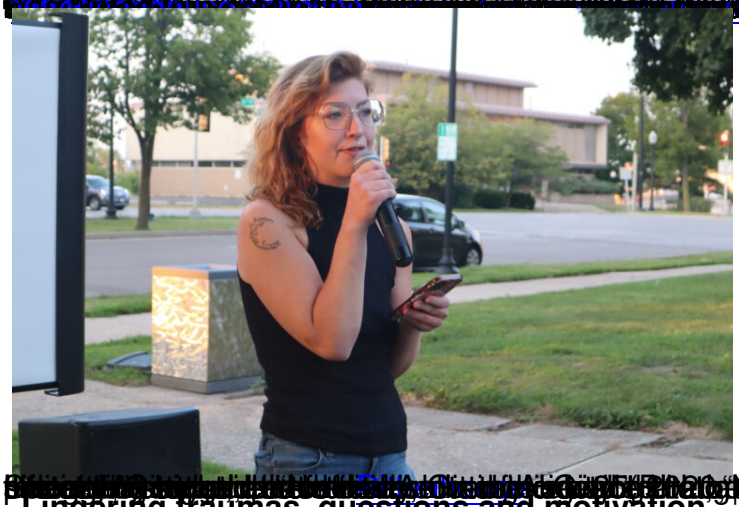
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Two years after the unrest that followed the shooting of Jacob Blake, a sense of mournful angst loomed thick in the Kenosha's Civic Park Wednesday evening as a modest gathering of community members assembled to unpack those few chaotic nights. The evening was one of reflection, but also refusal to allow Kenosha's uprising to be exploited and forgotten.

Other than those who had gathered for the event, Civic Park was empty of people. Organized by Black Leaders Organizing Communities (BLOC), For Our Future Wisconsin, and Leaders of Kenosha (LOK), the event revisited the unrest on the ground where it occurred, on a night when Civic Park was filled with crowds of protesters confronted by National Guard soldiers, riot police, and the federal agencies assisting them.







Lingering traumas, questions and motivation

The Wisconsin Examiner was invited to join a private community dialogue after the public Civic Park event. There, participants shared their sense that national and international media along with politicians have all exploited Kenosha's trauma.

"I feel like the media was only here to get their good shots of the buildings burning and people protesting, and then they got out," said Devynn Johnson, a volunteer at the Grace Welcome

Center food pantry who also helped organize medic teams during the unrest. “Because they wanted to spin their image of Kenosha to make people think it was something else than it really was.”



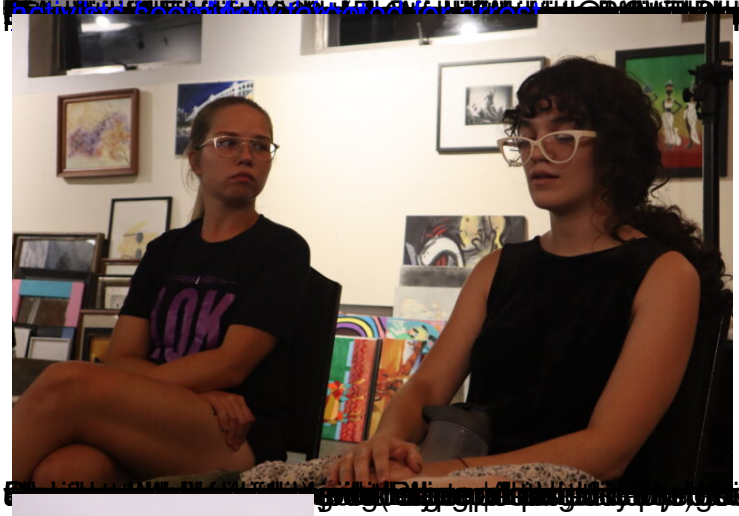
Devynn Johnson (right) sits beside Kyle Flood. (Photo | Isiah Holmes)

The nights of unrest in late August were sensationalized, said Kyle Johnson, a member of Kenosha BLOC. He contrasted the attention surrounding those events with what happened after the Blake shooting was ruled justified in January 2021 and after the acquittal of Rittenhouse in November 2021: “Nothing,” Johnson said.

“We had some healing, we had some great conversations,” he continued. “Not a building was burned, not a window was smashed. And, lo and behold, we didn’t see Fox News, we didn’t see CNN, we didn’t see MSNBC, with their cameras asking, ‘Hey how did you guys get this done? How did you make sure that what happened in August of 2020 didn’t happen during the trial?’”

For Kenosha residents, a broader historical context also got lost in the noise. Dayvin Hallmon, who served on Kenosha’s county board for 10 years, warned colleagues for years that ignoring problems with the police and the needs of minority communities would one day trigger unrest. Hallmon “knew that Kenosha was the perfect recipe for this to happen,” said Devynn Johnson. “And we all kind of felt like that, that Kenosha was being built up to this.”


CIVIL UNREST
KENOSHA
POLICE
2020




HOLD THE LINE





Moving forward

Through everything that's happened, Kenosha's activist community has continued to evolve. Before 2020, McLean and others told Wisconsin Examiner, the area didn't have much of a grassroots network. Since then, groups have come into being, condensed and reformed. Flood, who's been a local activist for a decade, said participation ebbs and flows.



Tanya McLean (left) sits beside Jacob Blake Sr. (center) and Kyle Flood. (Photo | Isiah Holmes)

“I think there appears to be less energy than there was in 2020 because there’s fewer people coming out and doing stuff,” said Flood. “I think that’s a big mix of trauma, and the energy’s not there because people are tired and people are exhausted.” While marches may attract slim numbers from time to time, more people appear to be speaking out at local government meetings, he said. “We’re starting to move into a new phase.”

Yet, the necessity of the work remains evident even two years later. “For LOK, that’s why voter registration is so important,” said Ness. “Because it’s happening. The people on the other side who hate us, who have demonized us, who would paint us as violent — they’re fired up and they’re using that tool.”



Erica Ness (Photo | Isiah Holmes)

Michels and other Republican politicians visited Kenosha for the anniversary of the unrest, where Michels received the endorsement of Kenosha’s police union. On the anniversary of Blake’s shooting, he stood with a group of officers including Pablo Torres, who shot two people 10 days apart in 2015, one of them fatally.

Some in the community see the police union as politically powerful with sway over the city’s budget, and they are troubled. Still, grassroots organizations remain steadfast, and now prefer working in small collectives rather than massive groups, or exhausting resources with daily protests. To some, Kenosha has just been seen as a political tool, said Kyle Johnson. But to

members of the community, the city is much more.

“The people that actually want to make progress are looking forward,” said Johnson. “We’re talking about what we can do to bring solutions, to make people’s lives better, to heal people, to reimagine how we approach community building.”

by Isiah Holmes, Wisconsin Examiner
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