

What's Your Sign? One Saturday in Beaufort

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor



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Last Saturday, my husband and I were traveling down Boundary Street when we found ourselves suddenly surrounded by hoopla. As we rolled up to the light at the corner of Ribaut, there appeared to be two public demonstrations vying for attention (and horn honks) – two groups of Beaufort citizens, on opposite sides of the street, chanting, brandishing posters, and waving flags.

On the old Piggly Wiggly side of Boundary were ‘Back The Blue,’ a bunch of folks decked out in patriotic garb, rallying in support of law enforcement officers and first responders. Across the street, ‘Unified Beaufort’ was protesting racial injustice. Slogans like “Black Lives Matter” and “Police the Violence” caught my eye.

I felt myself tense up. The endless Either/Or imagery of 2020 America had come home to Beaufort. The relentless *pressure* to stand on one side of this road or the other. Law Enforcement or Black Lives. (*Hello?! I choose both!*) I was half hoping to return from my errand, jump on Facebook, and learn that this fleeting vision out my window had, in fact, been one big rally – a joint demonstration – utilizing both sides of the road.

No such luck. Definitely two separate rallies. Fortunately, they remained peaceful throughout the day – i.e. “incident free” – though a photographer on the scene said some “minor

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heckling” had occurred between the groups. I guess that’s about the best we can hope for these days. Minor heckling never killed anybody, right? Maybe minor heckling even makes you stronger?

Ugh, I don’t know. Minor, major, or medium-strength, I hate heckling. Especially hometown heckling.

I did learn, a few days later, that some police officers had shown up at the Unified Beaufort rally, and that did my heart good. This Unified group, led by Tim Garvin, has consistently risen above the chaos we’ve seen elsewhere in the country – reaching across boundaries, resisting discord – and I’ve been impressed with their commitment to non-violence even as they keep their message front and center.

Elsewhere in Beaufort – on the same Saturday – a small group of parents were protesting the BCSD’s recent decision to start school online instead of in person. Posters featured slogans like: “Kids Won’t Learn If They Can’t Return,” “No Face to Face Classes? Refund Taxes!” and, my personal favorite, “Hell No! They Will Go!”

As the mother of a Clemson freshman who’s currently “going off to college” in her childhood bedroom – in a house that seems to grow smaller by the day – I feel their pain and also the BCSD’s. The Covid 19 pandemic has created an impossible situation for teachers, parents, and students of all ages.

Speaking of which, I listened to a podcast last week that featured working parents commiserating over the fact that their children’s schools had decided to go virtual. Fortunately, they had all found alternative places to send their kids during the workday – churches, community centers, etc. – where adults will be supervising them in groups as they take their classes online. The podcast parents were grateful that their communities had stepped in to fill a vacuum, but one quipped, ironically, “Congratulations. You’ve invented... school.”

But back to Beaufort. Over at the downtown post office, on that very same Saturday, yet another group of concerned citizens were showing their support for the U.S. Postal Service, an institution that has received more love in the past few weeks than it has, perhaps, in my lifetime. Remember when we all complained about the long lines and slow delivery, and “going postal” was a popular expression? I imagine those sentiments wouldn’t play well today. Thanks to Donald Trump’s weird crusade against the USPS – and worries about how it might affect the election – this long-in-the-tooth behemoth of a utility has suddenly been recast as America’s

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sweetheart, the very lynchpin of our democracy. So last Saturday, Beaufortonians stood outside our downtown branch bearing signs with slogans like “Hands Off My Mail,” “Rain, Sleet, Snow, Voting,” and “Signed, Sealed, Delivered: Save Our USPS.”

I'm also told I missed an Anti-Maskers' demonstration the day before, but that's just hearsay, so don't quote me on it. Either way, I think I've made my point that Beaufort has been in full protest mode, much like everywhere else.

Writing in the *Washington Post* a couple of months ago – when I kind of figured this protesting stuff was a passing phase, and more specifically targeted – Thomas Sugrue contrasted our current unrest with that of the '60s:

“The 1960s protests happened at a moment of great economic prosperity that conspicuously left a growing segment of the black population on the sidelines. The 2020 protests, by contrast, are playing out in the context of a massive economic collapse that is affecting people of color particularly harshly . . . but hitting everyone hard. The diversity of this year's protests points to the reality that during a deep recession, in the midst of a pandemic, everyone is a potential agitator.”

Well, maybe not *everyone*.

I've mentioned here before that I'm not a big protest person. It's not just because protesting makes me feel awkward – like somebody I'm not – but because I'm terrible at summing up my thoughts in a short, pithy, poster-worthy way. (Have you noticed?)

If I showed up a protest, I'd have to hold a giant, unwieldy banner. You'd likely see me floating catchy slogans like this:

- I Support the USPS, but UPS is Faster and Has Better Tracking! (Also, I enjoy voting in person. Makes me feel good. I like the stickers. But maybe I'll vote by mail this year.)
- I Hate Masks – so Hot and Dehumanizing – But I Wear Them. (Etsy has great deals on some cute floral prints!)
- Black Lives Totally Matter – *Duh* – and I (Obviously) Back the Blue, too!
- Open Our Schools! But Only If It Seems Safe. Maybe Half Days? Alternating? Good luck keeping little kids in masks. And six feet apart. One second thought...
- Silence is NOT Violence. People are Silent for Many Reasons. Shall I List Them? (I'm gonna need a bigger banner.)

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- I'm White, But I'm Not "Fragile." (I'm frustrated. I'm upset. I'm confused. Sometimes I'm even angry. But I'm not fragile.)
- Can We Please Stop Labeling Each Other and Start Listening to Each Other? Seriously, y'all.
- "You Want a Revolution? I Want a Revelation!" – The Schuyler Sisters, *Hamilton*

□ □ □ □ □ Hey, that last one might actually fit on a protest poster. Maybe I'll get the hang of this yet.

So, what's *your* □ sign?