

The Scene
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FOREST PROTEST CITY

Organizer Carol Steiner says people are fed up, fired up, and won't stop raising hell until there's change

By Sam Allard

CAROL STEINER, A MEMBER

of and spokesperson for Puncture the Silence-Stop Mass Incarceration Cleveland, organized last Tuesday's protest on Public Square. It was the most visible and most disruptive of the responses to the shooting death of 12-year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland and a grand jury's decision not to indict now-former Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson in St. Louis. We caught up with Carol Monday morning to talk about her group, last week's protests, and what's to come in Cleveland's ongoing response to police-involved shootings.

So what is your group, exactly? How did it form?

In April, a group of older women formed the Puncture the Silence-Stop Mass Incarceration Movement and immediately endorsed the call put out by the Stop Mass Incarceration Network in New York City (founded by Carl Dix and Cornel West) for a month of mass resistance to mass incarceration, police terror and the criminalization of a generation. We set our purpose as raising awareness, fomenting a movement, and planning actions with others who are interested in opposing the new Jim Crow.

The New Jim Crow? You didn't



coin that, did you?

No, we were very inspired by Michelle Alexander's book (also called *The New Jim Crow*), which gives an outline of how, in the last 40 years, the War on Drugs has filled American jails so disproportionately with people of color. We felt like we just had to do something about all those injustices.

Were you all friends beforehand?

Several of us read the book and sent out letters inviting people who we thought might be interested to come to a meeting. Eight people showed up to the meeting. That's how we started. Even at that time, the news — Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis — things were just unacceptable. Very upsetting.

What were you up to before last week's protests?

As I say, we did endorse the call for the nationwide month of resistance in October. Here in Cleveland, as elsewhere, we engaged clergy around doing sermons about stopping mass incarceration; we had an art show at the art palace on Kinsman; and then on Oct. 22 — that was sort of the culmination all across the country — we had what we considered a very successful protest on Public Square.

But last week was your most visible action to date. What was the genesis there?

The national network called for America to come to a halt if Darren Wilson was exonerated by the grand jury. As in other cities, we put out the call. The idea was that right now, we should disrupt business as usual and keep up the message that these police that are killing unarmed people need to be indicted and convicted for their crimes. And it wasn't just Tuesday's



The nationwide refrain comes to Cleveland.

protest. We participated in the Black Lives Matter Friday at the Wal-Mart on Warrensville Road and the rally and vigil for the families down at Heritage Middle School on Saturday evening.

The families of Timothy Russell and Malissa Williams?

Yes, and this was one week after Tamir was shot.

How do you compare the November, 2012 car chase and the Tamir Rice shooting last week? Is it the same thing people are protesting?

Well I think the 137 shots, and the chase, and [officer] Brelo on top of the car firing into the car, and each of the officers firing at least 20 shots, and 60-plus cars involved, that was very extreme. Tamir's was extreme in another way. Why do you rush up to someone in a neighborhood park and just shoot? And then find out he's a child? In a sense that these were both police killings and that there should be justice for these people, yes.

All these people coming out to protest almost seems like a silver lining.

We are very excited that there has been such an outpouring of people and that people have been so active, people from campaigns for reform that we wouldn't necessarily focus on. We just think it's wonderful. There are so many groups, so many people in the streets, and so many people who actually led us on Tuesday in the action. We didn't have that planned.

You mentioned last week that the Shoreway disruption was pretty much impromptu.

Yes, moving down to the highway totally came from the crowd. And

the fact that people were tweeting on the spot, and the press was there, tweeting on the spot, it allowed for people to join us. We swelled up to what we think was 300 to 350 people there. It was a little chaotic, but it was a wonderful thing. In much larger numbers and much more vocally, people are saying that this is not something we want to see happen. We want it to stop. And we're gonna keep raising hell until it stops.

You're no stranger to protests though.

Well, I'm up there in years so I've been through the black liberation struggles of the 1960s, fighting for black studies in the schools, against the war in Vietnam and all that. This is exciting, it kind of reminds me of that period.

How so?

The young people are saying, "What's important here? Should black people be leading this without white people?" A lot of different views are being struggled out and that's a wonderful thing. What's the path forward? How are we gonna stop this?

How are we going to stop this?

That's another thing that Michelle Alexander calls for, and we've adopted it as a mandate. Don't be bogged down by legal reforms. We need a groundswell from this bottom up in this country. We need another social movement.

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(Photos by Sam Allard)