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NEWS

Columbus area leaders, activists applaud Chauvin conviction, cite need for more changes

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City officials and leaders of Columbus' Black community applauded the verdict in the murder trial of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin on Tuesday. But they all said more work still needs to be done.

A jury convicted Chauvin on Tuesday of second- and third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter.

Stephanie Hightower, president and CEO of the Columbus Urban League, said that the country needed to do some collective soul-searching, regardless of whether there was a conviction or not.

More: Small crowd gathers Downtown Columbus to celebrate Derek Chauvin verdict

"The death of George Floyd was caught on video and we saw all nine and a half agonizing minutes," Hightower said in a prepared statement. "That video gave death a voice and racist violence a face. It exemplified the debilitating and sometimes fatal encounters that Black people have reported about law enforcement for decades."

The Columbus Urban League, Hightower said, plans to double down on its work for social justice and racial equity. It's clear that those missions matter more in 2021 than ever before, she said.

Hightower questioned whether a conviction would have been reached without video and said that Black people alone shouldn't have to bear the burden of proof of the "need for real change."

Columbus police shooting updates: Aunt says teen girl killed; crowd protests

"We know that our community continues to struggle to overcome the effects of hundreds of years of trauma, trauma that is exemplified and exacerbated by the deaths of George Floyd, Casey Goodson Jr., Andre Hill and so many others," Hightower said. "I pray that we can grieve peacefully."

Trial's outcome was 'right one'

The Columbus branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) released a statement on Tuesday calling the trial's outcome "the right one." The Columbus branch of the NAACP remains committed to increasing oversight of police in the wake of George Floyd's killing, according to the statement.

"Today's outcome sends a clear message to law enforcement that they are not above the law," the press release stated. "Their actions have consequences."

News: Columbus faith leaders rejoice over Chauvin verdict, say more work to be done locally

Despite the verdict, more changes need to be made to hold police accountable, according to the NAACP in Columbus. The branch cited the deaths of Casey Goodson Jr. and Andre Hill in Columbus as evidence that the issues that led to Floyd's death in Minneapolis are universal ones.

"These egregious behaviors must stop and sweeping systematic changes are needed" the statement read.

Calls for celebration and to continue the fight

Not long after the verdict came down, local community organizer Charlie Stewart was sending messages to the members of Black Queer & Intersectional Collective and speaking of how today was a day for celebration.

"I think today is a good day. I think today we can rest. I think that we can celebrate. This could be a day that we can celebrate because people recognized that our lives matter, that George Floyd's life mattered," said Stewart.

But even as Stewart spoke of how the three guilty verdicts meant the right thing happened in that Minnesota courtroom, there was something else to keep in mind.

“Of course, this is nowhere near the end. We have a lot of fighting to do here especially here locally in Columbus,” Stewart said. “But I think we can take the momentum and the message that the power is in the people.”

For the families of the many other Black men killed by police still waiting for justice, the movement cannot stop now, said Stewart, who uses they/them pronouns.

News: Derek Chauvin verdict celebrated in Columbus barbershop with fist pump, photos

Stewart said that while the guilty verdicts against Chauvin are cause to celebrate, they think about all that had to happen to get them: quality video of the incident, a prosecutor willing to take the case to trial, jurors set on doing the right thing.

“This justice system is not meant for us. It’s not built for us. It’s all by chance that we got here,” Stewart said. “So we take what happened and collectively come together, make people understand and continue to fight for abolition as we fight for justice for all the rest of these families.”

But even as Stewart was talking to other organizers about what comes next, they all got word that Columbus police fatally shot someone on the Southeast Side Tuesday evening. Stewart, an abolitionist, said it would be difficult for activists to process yet another death even at the same time that the verdicts against Chauvin were cause for a glimmer of hope.

Aramis Malachi-Ture Sundiata of the People’s Justice Project agreed, and said “the people have to have a win — to feel like we can actually do something” with the conviction of Chauvin.

Yet he cautioned about seeing it as too much of a victory for the movement.

“The structures and the ruling class will sacrifice their own to pacify the movement and the people. They will sacrifice their own to save itself,” Sundiata said. “That’s why it is important for us to continue the struggle.”

Chauvin conviction proof justice system can work, say state and federal leaders

Gov. Mike DeWine said that the outcome of the Chauvin's trial shows that the justice system can work correctly.

"A jury in Minneapolis has spoken by convicting Derek Chauvin of second and third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter in the death of George Floyd...As we go forward as a nation, we must learn from the tragic death of George Floyd," DeWine said in a prepared statement.

U.S. Congresswoman Joyce Beatty, whose district includes most of Columbus, said in a written release that she is hopeful the verdict will be "the catalyst to turn agony into action," with the public demanding "transparency, accountability and equal justice."

"Breonna Taylor, Daunte Wright, Adam Toledo, Andre Hill, Casey Goodson, Jr., Tamir Rice, and George Floyd should be alive, and no verdict will bring them back or undo the unimaginable heartache and loss their family, friends, and our communities have had to endure," Beatty said.

Columbus leaders applaud verdict

Columbus City Council President Shannon Hardin also weighed in on the outcome of the trial Tuesday, saying that he was thinking of Floyd's family and the cities of Minneapolis and Columbus.

After having watched video of the murder over and over again for much of the last year, Hardin said he hopes to begin rebuilding trust between the community and the criminal justice system. That will be furthered with Columbus' new civilian police review board that will investigate officers' uses of force and potential misconduct, and "my top priority, which is creating an alternative crisis response bureau so that folks get the right response to the crisis at hand."

The sense of tension as the trial continued has been "palpable," Hardin said.

He expects that many in the public will react with relief, while others "will want to use this as energy to push for reform, and I encourage that." But Hardin said he believes the public's reaction will remain peaceful, with the verdict used as "positive energy" the rest of the week.

"I expect it to happen, I really do," Hardin said. "Folks are tired. Folks are really exhausted."

Along with Hardin, Columbus Mayor Andrew J. Ginther voiced his opinion that the verdict was the best possible outcome. In a prepared statement, Ginther quoted civil rights leader the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., as saying the "arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

On Tuesday, Ginther said "the system worked." But the mayor said changes still need to be made to create more justice and accountability.

"This verdict is the best outcome following the tragic and unnecessary loss of life," Ginther said. "It brings some measure of justice for those who knew and loved George Floyd, but it will not restore his life, nor will it erase the centuries of racial injustice that continues to plague our nation."

Columbus Public Safety Director Ned Pettus added his voice to the list of Columbus leaders praising the jury's verdict on Tuesday. Pettus, a Black man, has served as director of public safety in Columbus since 2016.

"This verdict is a critical step toward justice for the family of George Floyd," Pettus said in a prepared statement. "For all who see themselves or their loved ones in George Floyd, for all who say, 'that could have been me, that could have been my son or my brother,' this verdict is vindication that your lives matter. Your lives have value. And you deserve equal protection and equal justice under the law."

Columbus City Council President Pro Tem Elizabeth Brown called the verdict "a step towards justice for George Floyd and his family." Brown said she hopes that this accountability will help change behavior in the future.

"At the same time, we still have a tremendous amount of work ahead to make systemic improvements to public safety — especially right at home in Columbus," Brown said. "I urge folks across our city to stay engaged in this work — peacefully, urgently, and deliberately."

Ohio educators say Chauvin trial is 'a teachable moment'

Jim O'Connor, president of the Ohio Council for the Social Studies, an organization for the state's social studies teachers, called Tuesday's verdict "a teachable moment for everybody."

"We need to get back to some common ground and some common sense on what exactly is the role of government and police departments. How can we make society better? How can we police better?" O'Connor said. "Hopefully there are better days ahead and George Floyd's death, though so senseless, will help us change as a society."

O'Connor has taught social studies for 27 years at Princeton High School, a school of predominantly Black and Hispanic students north of Cincinnati.

He expects that Tuesday's verdict will cap future history lessons about the groups of diverse people who came together in 2020 to demand change.

"In the protests last summer, I saw the future of our country," O'Connor said. "That's what humanity is about."

Scott DiMauro, a high school social studies teacher from Worthington and president of the Ohio Education Association, the state's largest teachers union, said on Twitter that the verdict is a "step toward justice," but that advocacy for students and families must continue from educators.

"It's at least a step forward. we still have a lot of work to do to make sure that everyone regardless of their race or background can feel safe and not have to live in fear, particularly not have to live in fear of those who are sworn to protect us, but glad to see the decision was made."

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