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Aunt of George Floyd and author of 'Lift Your Voice' visits Lafayette

By Sharon K. Sobotta



Author Angela Harrelson Photo provided

When Angela Harrelson's nephew died under the knee of former Minneapolis Police Officer Derek Chauvin on May 25, 2020, people in Lamorinda and across the country took notice while pondering what could be done for a more just, inclusive world. Harrelson will add her voice to the local conversation at 7 p.m. March 13 at Town Hall Theatre, as she shares her story as the aunt of the man much of the world came to know posthumously as George Perry Floyd.

Lafayette Council Member Wei-Tai Kwok still remembers coming together with others in Lafayette in June 2020, just weeks after Floyd's death. "I participated in an unprecedented gathering and Black Lives Matter march (organized by local high school students) from downtown Lafayette Plaza, over to the Veteran's Hall, and then back. In my 20 years living in this city, I have not seen a larger and more emotional crowd," Kwok remembers. Kwok believes Harrelson's voice is an important one for residents to hear. "In a world with so many other crises and challenges consuming our time, energy and mindshare, Angela Harrelson's voice is a personal and timely reminder to stay the course."

Harrelson first met her nephew when she was 17, when Floyd's mother returned to her childhood home with 5-year-old Floyd and his four siblings. As one of 14 children and the daughter of sharecroppers, Harrelson grew up humbly.

"We were very poor. We didn't have indoor plumbing. Our house could have easily been condemned," Harrelson says. "We didn't have much of anything, but we had a house full of love. I remember little Perry (George Floyd). He was so humble and sweet. He didn't care that he had to use an outhouse or that the house was falling apart. He was happy."

Floyd grew up in the projects of Houston, Texas with his mom and siblings. Harrelson says that Floyd's father struggled with addiction and Floyd's mother raised her own kids and some of her grandchildren.

"He always knew that his father was out there somewhere and I think that weighed on him." That, she says, is how he got into drugs. "He did the wrong things for the right reasons (and he ended up getting addicted)."

Floyd, who experienced bouts of incarceration for crimes related to sustaining his addiction, went through treatment and worked hard to stay sober, but sometimes relapsed, as more than half of people with substance addictions do.

It was Floyd's determination to stay sober, and carve out a better life for himself and his community after he got out of prison, that led him to Minnesota. "When he got out of prison, he started doing a lot of community outreach work with a pastor in Houston," Harrelson says. "Through that work (and the pastor that he helped) he got connected with someone in Minnesota and relocated for a fresh start."

Once in Minnesota, Floyd went through treatment, got a job at the Salvation Army, another at a club as a bouncer and another as a truck driver, and had a long bout of sobriety. "He was working out every day and he was talking straight and going to work. He really was doing well." Things started to go downhill for Floyd when his mother's health began to fail.

Floyd's mother died on May 30, 2018, just shy of two years from the day that Floyd was killed. When Floyd and Harrelson met in Texas to bid Floyd's mother farewell, Harrelson, who is a nurse for people with chemical dependencies, knew that something was wrong. "He wasn't the same. I could see it in his eyes. And when I hugged him, I could feel how skinny he'd gotten." That's when she knew Floyd had likely relapsed.

On Floyd's last day of life, when he called out for his mother, Harrelson believes that he saw her and

reunited with her. "When he said 'Mama,' I think she appeared with open arms and said, 'Come to me, son, I'll take care of you' and he went."

Now, Harrelson and others have created the George Floyd Global Memorial, a place to memorialize those who have died of violence and a project that works toward a world where police-involved killings will no longer be common-place.

Dennis Markam, the managing director of Town Hall Theatre, is thrilled that Harrelson is bringing her story to Lafayette and believes the theater is the perfect venue for Harrelson's forthcoming visit. "This building has been a community gathering place since it was first built, so it feels right (for this) event." Markam says, noting that the event is important, not only to Town Hall Theatre, but also to the town of Lafayette.

"(In largely) white communities, when we talk about racial injustice and systemic abuses of power and all of these big, multifaceted topics it becomes incredibly easy to turn folks like George Floyd or Breonna Taylor or Trayvon Martin or Miles Hall into ideas rather than people," Markam says. "Ms. Harrelson's work gives us a human context to the narrative of George Floyd's murder, a sense of who her nephew was as a person, and how the world can honor his memory by enacting systemic changes."

For information or tickets for "Lift Your Voice: An evening with Angela Harrelson," visit townhalltheatre.com. Tickets are available for free will donations and all proceeds will benefit the George Floyd Global Memorial. Copies of Harrelson's book "Lift Your Voice" can be pre-ordered with Reasonable Books via email at books@reasonable.online, or by calling (925) 385-3026.

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