

*A group of educators marched from Durham and North Raleigh to the State Capitol on June 14-15, 2016, asking to meet with governor. Fourteen members of Organize 2020 were arrested on June 15, 2016 after blocking a street when the governor chose not to meet with them. These teachers believe that our students deserve more. Here are their reflections on the 23-mile march, the rally at the legislature and Capitol, and their arrests for civil disobedience.*



**Red4EdNC**

## Why I Participated in Civil Disobedience

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When the officer helped me stand on my feet, after binding my hands behind my back with zip ties, my mind went blank. Friends and family who were there on the sidewalk said I was screaming at the top of my lungs, "Our students deserve more!" but I don't actually remember what was coming out of my mouth. My last clear thought between sitting on the burning asphalt and moving towards the stuffy paddy wagon was that I could not - and would not - go into that van silently.

I had not gotten to that day, in that heat, with those people, to be silent. I had put too much time, love and energy into this day and into each day spent with my students knowing that there was no way for my colleagues and me to reasonably meet all of their needs yet never ceasing to try. I was going to keep shouting and lifting my students' needs until the end.

When we started planning the march and rally, one of the first tasks was to decide on clear goals. The hardest part of this was narrowing all of our students' critical needs down to a short list. When you know folks can realistically only remember 4-5 things, how do you decide which of our students' varied and equally important needs get raised? More importantly, how do you decide which *don't*? Through the discussions and negotiations around this challenge, one thing became strikingly clear to me -- we can never go back.

We can never go back to just talking about teacher pay and textbooks. We can never go back to just talking about buying supplies out of our pocket or the technology that doesn't consistently work. It doesn't feel right to just talk about paint peeling and broken desks. Yes, those things are very important to our daily learning and teaching conditions, but we have opened the school doors and are showing the totality of the needs that exist for our students, and we can never go back.

We are lifting up the fact that many of our students are living in conditions where their basic human needs are not being met. We are asking that the Governor pay attention to the fact that our students are drinking poisoned water from their taps; that our students and their families need access to healthcare; that our students need living wages for their parents; that our

students are facing discrimination every day and now he has preserved that discrimination in law.

*We can never go back.*

Once I reconciled the fact that our fight was for our students and the Governor's fight was for votes, the rest became easy. We were marching for hundreds of thousands of our students, and we were rallying to raise awareness around five of their most critical needs. We were meeting with the Governor to make two simple, low-cost requests: spend the surplus on public schools and expand Medicaid now. We were not marching to talk about teachers or their pay. We were marching for our kids and their families.

I was not surprised when the Governor's aides did not answer our phone calls. We had talked for hours over the days before the rally trying to figure out how the Governor might avoid having a public conversation with teachers who were demanding, not higher pay, but that their students' most basic human needs be met.

I was not surprised when we walked around the Capitol building knocking on doors that remained silent and locked. I was not even surprised that they were locked well before closing time.

I was not surprised when the crowd was fired up and ready to raise their voices in unison crying out, "Spend the Surplus! Expand Medicaid! Repeal HB2!"

What did surprise me, however, was the volume of folks who crowded Morgan Street helping to stop traffic long enough for 14 people to get into the line that would be held for 30 minutes. I had believed that teachers would be rule-followers and would have been nervous or hesitant when blocking a street. And they boldly proved me wrong. They proved that when our students are at stake, we are *all* willing to take risks to protect them and lift them.

You see, when it comes to our students, we have this fiercely protective stance that we just assume. Our kids' lives are threatened each day that they go without access to affordable healthcare. Their well-beings are threatened when their parents have to choose between heating their homes or paying for food because they don't earn enough to do both. Their bodies and lives are threatened in a very real, direct way when they are criminalized based on their race, their immigration status or their gender identity -- even as early as elementary school.

So standing in the middle of the street, blocking traffic with 13 of my comrades felt easy to do. It felt easy because as we shouted "It is our duty to fight for our freedom," I thought of my student who so very brilliantly fights for his freedom each day. He fights for freedom from the pain and fear having an ill parent can cause; he fights to keep that fear from his little sister; and he fights because he has the heart and the soul of a fighter. I thought of the time he couldn't fight anymore, and he just sobbed on my shoulder in the middle of the hallway, not caring who saw and letting me hold his fight for a little while.

When we shouted, "It is our duty to win," I thought of my student who worked so hard this year to overcome emotional and academic barriers that have previously held him back. I thought of him telling his classroom teacher that he had anger issues and how she simply asked, "Would you like to choose something different?" instead of labeling him or allowing him to label himself. He knows it is his duty to win. He knows that winning happens with a team, and he has learned

to seek out those that will help him win. I thought of his smile and his pride when he looked at me after a reading group one day and said, "You got us, right, Ms. B? You always got us."

When we shouted, "We must love and protect one another," I thought of my students who always led their classes to care for one another. They understood already at 9- and 10-years-old that we show up for one another and take care of each other first and foremost. They were always the first to offer a hand to a friend or to step up and in when a classmate was at risk of saying or doing something they may regret. I thought about the way they celebrated and lifted other students up, already knowing that some people need a little more love. Already understanding that, in our class, everyone gets what they need.

When we shouted, "We have nothing to lose but our chains," I thought of my student who, after the non-indictment of Michael Brown's murderer, was so compelled to take action that she spent a recess period organizing her peers to meet during lunch and create an agenda to bring to me when asking permission to use our classroom for a meeting space. I thought about how she facilitated that meeting so smoothly, allowing each person space to share their thoughts and ideas and then distributed responsibilities and roles to her classmates. I thought of my other student who, despite her shyness, demonstrated great bravery and courage when she stood up in that same meeting to speak about her own observations and experiences with racism in the justice system (yes, at 9-years-old).

I had the faces and voices of hundreds of children running through my heart and my mind as we chanted their needs.

Our kids are under attack. What would you do if someone threatened the lives and the futures of your students?

Yes, I had a choice. I always have a choice, but when it comes to my kids...I will choose them every time. I don't want my students to have to fight this hard for their education - for their lives. People have already fought for them. Folks have already shed blood, sweat, tears and *died* for their lives.

We have a duty to fight for them. We have a duty to win. Let's lose those chains.