

McGill joins hoodie protests sweeping U.S. law campuses over Trayvon Martin death

BY RENÉ BRUEMMER, THE GAZETTE MARCH 30, 2012



McGill law students Ngozi Okidegbe (left), Jason Chung, Alex Spraggs, Anne-Karine Dabo, Kiran Ross, Mark Phillips wear hoodies Thursday to raise awareness about shooting death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, a Florida high school student who was shot and killed by George Zimmerman.

Photograph by: Vincenzo D'Alto, The Gazette

MONTREAL - Spurred by the shooting death of an unarmed black youth in Florida, more than 100 McGill law students and half a dozen faculty members donned hooded sweatshirts this week to raise awareness about racial profiling.

The symbolic demonstration echoed events held at law faculties at U.S. universities like Harvard, Yale and Georgetown in honour of Trayvon Martin.

The 17-year-old high school student was shot and killed on Feb. 26 by George Zimmerman, a neighbourhood watch captain, as he was returning to the gated community in which he lived in Sanford, Fla.

Zimmerman alleged he killed Martin in self-defence, and Florida police did not arrest him.

The case has triggered nationwide protests, and is under review by the U.S. Justice Department.

Many believe Zimmerman targeted Martin because he was black. He was wearing a hooded sweatshirt, commonly known as a hoodie, prompting Fox news anchor Geraldo Rivera to say:

“I think the hoodie is as much responsible for Trayvon Martin’s death as much as George Zimmerman was.”

Rivera counselled black and latino parents not to let their children go out in hoodies.

The comments were met with widespread criticism and have spawned several Million Hoodie Marches.

The Miami Heat basketball team posted pictures of themselves standing together wearing hooded sweatshirts, with messages like “We want justice.”

On Wednesday, Democratic Congressman Bobby Rush of Illinois was reprimanded for wearing a hoodie in the House of Congress in support of Martin’s family.

Students at McGill donned hoodies on Wednesday and Thursday to remind people those issues are not confined to the U.S.

“I just wanted to highlight that we like to think of racial profiling as a problem in the States, but it’s a problem in Canada that needs to be addressed as well,” said first-year law student Ngozi Okidegbe, 23, who initiated the event with the aid of Jason Chung, Emily Elder and Anne-Karine Dabo.

“The fact so many students are wearing hoods shows there is recognition that this is a problem and we need to find strategies to deal with it.”

Okidegbe, who is originally from the Washington, D.C., area and has lived in Montreal for four years, said 150 students from the McGill law faculty and six professors participated.

“Evidence appears to show that it might have been manslaughter, it might have been murder, but (the Sanford, Fla., authorities) chose not to do a full investigation and just take Zimmerman’s word,” Okidegbe said.

“The family of Trayvon Martin was not able to get justice because of racialized stereotypes of what aggressors are supposed to be, and I think that was the straw that broke the camel’s back,” leading to the wave of protests.

Ontario’s Human Rights Commission and Quebec’s Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse released sweeping reports in recent years noting racial bias is evident in the justice system, and urged their respective governments to take the lead in battling the trends.

“It was great to see so many students (from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds) recognize that racial profiling is not something that just affects racialized minorities,” Okidegbe said.

“It affects all of us, in that none of us wants to live in a society where racial profiling is prevalent.”

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