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Sprinkling rain Thursday did not dampen protesters' spirits at the Putnam County Courthouse as they made their voices heard peacefully.

PEACE in the STREETS protest organizers Tevel Adams and Dar'Nesha Leonard stood for removing the Maltby Oak and the Confederate statue at the courthouse. They want the statue and the oak removed because of the symbols of oppression each represent.

The Rev. Karl Flagg invited elected officials on the steps of the courthouse as he led hundreds of protesters in prayer and urged peace and understanding.

"Palatka, Putnam County needs to set an example for the rest of America that we can get along, that we can stand together, that we can pray together," Flagg said during his prayer.

While the protest focused on the statue and the tree, the Black Lives Matter movement was an issue not forgotten.

The movement has gained global attention following the death of George Floyd last month, sparking protests and riots across the U.S.

Floyd, an African-American man, died after a white Minneapolis police officer knelt on his neck for almost nine minutes. The officer has since been fired and faces murder charges.

Supporters held signs with messages such as "I understand I'll never understand. However, I stand" and "Black is beautiful."

People who went to the rally could register to vote, sign petitions and participate in the unity walk, where supporters marched around the courthouse.

"I've had plenty of conversations with people in the community about how it feels to live as an African-American in the United States of America," Adams said in his speech. "I pray that changes are made in this country because I don't want to have those conversations with my child, and it makes me angry to even think about."

In her speech, Leonard said while the Maltby Oak tree “may have not been used to hang members of our community, these trees carry a deep, painful past. These trees were popular for the murder of not only my people, but the people who supported us.”

One speaker was Palatka resident Gavin Thomas, an advocate for protecting the statue. He suggested moving it to the West View Cemetery, where Confederate soldiers and black soldiers are buried close together.

Thomas said he is a direct descendant of four Confederate soldiers who all fought in Florida. He said he was not an advocate for the Confederacy, but rather for history.

“I can understand even it if it doesn’t affect me in the way it affects other people,” Thomas said. “(A) Confederate monument standing in front of a place of justice and peace doesn’t really give the right signal.”

While there was no violence or people who seemed to oppose the protest, some residents said they did not want the tree or statue taken down.

Heidi Crum called Putnam County her hometown before she moved to Ocala two months ago. On Thursday, she came back for the protest.

“I’m here because I believe all lives matter, not just one particular race. I’m here for all races,” Crum said. “I’m against them removing the statue and tree because it’s our history and our heritage.”

She said a variety of options could be taken if it would “solve a few problems,” such as removing the tree. But she does not want the statue to be destroyed.

Through the rain, cheers and positive conversations reverberated across the courthouse lawn as protesters hoped for change.

“The social injustices toward people of color, mass incarceration, lack of education, racial discrimination and systematic racism keep us dark in the night,” Adams said during his speech. “However, light comes out of darkness. I believe in what the future holds. That’s why we’re gathered here today.”

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