'It doesn't have to be this way'

Black Lives Matter activist DeRay McKesson sat down with a Street Roots vendor to talk about the movement he helped launch

BY EMILY GREEN
SENIOR STAFF REPORTER

Four years ago, DeRay McKesson was virtually unknown.

When he watched the protests that followed the 2014 police shooting of Michael Brown on television, he was working as the human resources director at Minneapolis Public Schools.

He thought the least he could do was drive down to Ferguson, Mo., for the weekend, but soon after, he decided to take a leave of absence from work to organize with protesters full time.

He tweeted videos of police clashing with protesters and distributed a newsletter describing on-the-ground events. He quickly rose to prominence on social media, becoming one of the most recognized voices among activists decrying police brutality.

One year after he arrived in Ferguson, McKesson co-founded "Campaign Zero," which advocates for policy changes aimed at lowering the number of fatal police shootings in the U.S. to zero.

It may seem like a lofty goal, but as McKesson told his audience during a recent visit to Portland, "it doesn't have to be this way."

U.S. police kill more people in a matter of days than many countries kill over the course of many years, according to "The Counted," a project of The Guardian that compiles data on police shootings.

For example, in England and Wales, there were 55 fatal police shootings between 1990 and 2014, while in the U.S., there were 59 fatal police shootings during the first *24 days* of 2015. Iceland has had only one fatal police shooting since the country was established as independent in 1944.

"For so many of us, we've forgotten how to imagine and how to dream of a better world," McKesson said.

He was in town March 15 to raise funds for Oregon Justice Resource Center, a nonprofit that promotes justice system reform and provides legal assistance to immigrants, incarcerated women and those who are wrongfully convicted.

The lower level of a large auditorium at First Congregational United Church of Christ was packed with several hundred people who had purchased tickets to hear McKesson speak.

McKesson sought to mobilize the predominantly white audience that evening.

"An ally says 'I love you' from a distance," he told them. "An accomplice says, 'I'm implicated in this too, and I have to use my awareness to do something different.'"

Since April 2017, McKesson has hosted "Pod Save the People," a weekly podcast focused on social justice issues, and he recently co-founded OurStates.org, a platform for resisting the Republican agenda through state policy advocacy.

Before Portlanders greeted McKesson with a standing ovation, he sat down with Street Roots and one of its vendors, "Netty" Johnson, to take questions about the Black Lives Matter movement.

Netty Johnson: *I'm honored to get the opportunity to meet you. Street Roots asked me, would I like to interview you regarding the Black Lives Matter movement. I wasn't really familiar with the whole movement, so I asked quite a few questions and talked to a few people because when I first saw the Black Lives Matter sign – it started coming up in the neighborhood I live in, which is predominantly white – I was offended, because I know every human matters.*

When young children see the sign that says "Black Lives Matter" and hear that police are coming for them, and they need to be ready because violence might happen, they may be misjudged by any movement. Do you believe that's sending the right message to our kids? When I tell my nephew, "Hey, police pull you over, don't move, follow the rules." Do you believe that "Black Lives Matter," that statement only, is confusing to a young child, maybe 12 and under?

DeRay McKesson: I am mindful that we are saying out loud and in public what was already true. The police have been killing people in neighborhoods way longer than we've been saying

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