

CRISTAL STATEN

Monticello, New York native just graduated from PACE University amid a pandemic, and an era of surging momentum in the Black Lives Matter movement. Gaining local notoriety as a vocal participant in protests from Sullivan to Ulster Counties has forced her to confront her loyalties as a twenty-one-year-old Black American woman raised in a predominantly white region with a veteran NYPD dad at home.

By JANET MERCER Photography MICHAEL DAVIS

Janet Mercel: PACE has a campus in New York City and Westchester County, but of course, schools were remote for most of your last semester. Where were you when the protests started gaining traction?

Cristal Staten: I had been commuting to school from our family's house in Monticello, and then when the pandemic hit, I just stayed. I was very happy to be at home while everything was unfolding. My first march was in New Paltz. It's such an artistic town, and it was beautifully done with the music and posters, but no one seemed to be stepping forward to address the public. So I stood up and spoke, and I've been speaking at protests since.

JM: You saw firsthand what it's like at marches in Brooklyn — who the protesters are and what the police are doing. How does it differ from what's happening upstate?

CS: In the city, it's the people against the police and vice versa. In the country, it's people against racists. There are so many anti-protesters that show up to counter the peaceful marches. In Pleasant Valley, I saw grown men in Trump hats spitting on children, and the local police do not get involved. They're mostly there for traffic control, and they did nothing to separate or protect the protesters.

JM: I watched the video of you addressing the police and the crowd with a bullhorn at the march on the bridge in Poughkeepsie.

"We are not anti-police, we are anti-racism, and that is what we are marching for. We are not marching against you; we are not fighting you; we're fighting racism within our own police department. Just know that we are with you, we feel it. We're the daughters and the brothers and the sons of law enforcement officers, we understand. There is no violence here against you."

JM: It feels as though the primary concern was protecting and comforting the officers, instead of the

other way around, especially when you invite a state trooper to embrace you. Your father is a longtime veteran of the NYPD. How does he feel about you not only protesting but being super visible and vocal on the front line?

CS: I'm Black, but I'm a girl and a non-threatening one. The way I see it, I'm at less risk than he is. My dad is a strong and powerful human, but he's a six-foot man, and I worry far more about him as a Black man in the world that I do about him as a policeman on the job. After meeting the criteria of his NYPD promotional exam, he was passed over three times in favor of white officers. No one wants to take on the NYPD. He's very frustrated and annoyed he can't really take part, and he worries about me making myself a target. You can face department charges if you attend protests or marches, you have to be very careful not to present yourself as anti-cop.

JM: So you see risk as varying by degrees, based on different traits of individuals in the Black community, and putting yourself on the line because your own perceived risk is lower. That's a big responsibility to take on. How have the movement and the protests affected you socially? Is there any tension between you and friends, or your community?

CS: My high school experience was very diverse, lots of Black kids, Spanish and white, (there were only about five Asians.) But Rock Hill (a hamlet outside Monticello) is middle class. Most of my friends were white and ended up going to good schools. People I know have said, 'Fuck Black Lives Matter, they're all terrorists,' and, 'Just wait until we get into a militarized state.' The mother of a white male (now former) friend of mine, made it clear she disapproved of me protesting. She said, 'I don't think your father would be very happy with you.' I told her he was well aware. I thought she'd always been so pleasant to me, but now I remember little comments. Once, we threw a party, and someone rented a stripper pole to dance. She looked at me and said, 'Who's going to be our little Black stripper?' After the protests, my friend said, 'Isn't it

a little extreme to lose friends over politics?' I said, 'It's not politics, it's human rights.'

JM: Why do you think you've made such an impression as a local advocate of BLM?

CS: I saw another woman at a march who was also vocal and on the front lines. She was passionate, she was great, but she looked and sounded more like what people stereotypically see as an angry Black woman, and the reporters all came to talk to me. I grew up within a system of white privilege that makes me less threatening to a white media. I know that makes me an outsider to traditionally Black American culture. It sounds funny to say, but I've always wanted to be a part of it. They're so joyous, and they're loud, they're laughing, there's a community bond I don't have. But because of my education and where I grew up, I can speak up, and people take me seriously. It's very easy to blame the Black community for their circumstances and supposedly self-inflicted issues. We need white journalists to listen in order to get the message out because otherwise, Black stories aren't accepted in mainstream media!

JM: Once you have the platform and people are listening, what's important to you to leave behind? What's the most crucial thing you might want your old classmates, or their parents, to hear?

CS: I want people to understand their privilege exists. They may have been oppressed for other various reasons, poverty, or as members of the LGBTQ community, but the Black struggle is just not something they've experienced. Most people in a privileged position don't want to disrupt their comfortable lives, but you have to give that up. The older generation of the Black community is accustomed to the system; they say, 'Your life is not worth it. If you get pulled over, just do as you're told, whatever you're supposed to do to survive.' But if you're Black, you'll be criminalized anyway, and then what? We need to keep protesting to get people to listen. It's time to stand up, not stand down.

