

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

To smile or not to smile, that is the question

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I suspect the word “mugshot” is a litmus test for anyone who has ever had an incarcerated parent. From fourth to tenth grade, the only interaction I had with my biological father was typing his name into a search bar and seeing whether or not he had amassed new charges and an updated mugshot since my last search. To me, he always looked so guilty. After a while, I didn’t want to know anymore.

When the end of college neared and I began applying for teaching positions, I petitioned several data-dragging sites to remove any connection between my name and my father’s, so that potential employers and future students would not draw a parallel between us.

This is a piece of my past that I only discuss when kids trust me enough to tell me their own struggle with an incarcerated parent. I tell them that we are responsible for making our lives the lives we want to lead, for making ourselves the people we want to be, and that we are not required to carry around the painful pieces of our past any longer than to find strength in them.

Thursday morning I woke up -- blistered from the march and bruised from the zip-tie cuffs -- to endless text messages featuring my own mugshot. Mortification. In the months of planning and in the days of the march, it never occurred to me that I would be starting the summer with my mugshot being broadcast on television screens and shared rampantly on social media sites. I got into my car and cried.

I did not cry from shame or self pity. I did not cry because I had become something I have tried my entire life to avoid. I cried because I chose to be put into handcuffs at 26, while some of my students have already been in handcuffs by 15. I cried because I had seen children come into that jail alone. I cried because I wasn’t sure if those children were still there while I was on my way home. I cried because I know the statistics of the population served by my school, and it is inevitable that some of the children that have sat in my classroom will sit in that jail. I cried because I was being thanked for my arrest while thousands of black and brown kids are criminalized for theirs.

I cried because I wholly recognized that my arrest was privileged.

Because we got help when we asked for help. Renisha McBride did not.

Because we were told we would be under arrest if we did not comply. Tamir Rice wasn't warned.

Because our seat belts were buckled upon my request. Freddie Gray's was undone.

Because we were able to hold up Kristin as she ebbed in and out of consciousness. No one was there for Raynette Turner.

Because we knew we would be out before the night was over. Over a million people are still waiting.

This industrialized prison machine is vile, guys. The observed ratio of officers to prisoners was better than the ratio of teachers to students in my school. The food was more nutritious than the lunch my kids are provided daily. The facilities were better than many schools I've seen in rural counties. The cost of keeping one person in prison for a single year is already more than three times what we spend on a student per year in this state, but here we are, begging for educational funding in the streets. How has it come to this? Why will we spend more on incarceration than education? Why will it be easier for my kids to get a gun than a diploma?

Before the intake officer took my photo, we joked about smiles being disallowed. I asked her what she would want her kids' teacher to look like in a mugshot. She laughed, and so did I, as she snapped the picture. I asked because I was terrified my students and their parents may see me looking solemn and think I was ashamed, or see me with a smile and think I was self-congratulatory. I am not ashamed, but I am not congratulating myself, either, despite what my mugshot may suggest. I'm just hoping no kids are disappointed by my guilt.

This isn't about 14 unflattering photos. This is about the fight for our kids, and how #studentsdeservemore. If you're proud of the dozens of people who put time and effort into this thing, if you're proud of Amy, Jessica, Kristin, Bryan, Carrol, Turquoise, Anca, Dawn, Alexa, Leah, Lisa, Donald, James, and me who went to jail for our kids, let's work to turn this thing around. Get involved with ORGANIZE 2020, vote, attend School Board Meetings ... do anything to make sure our kids get what they deserve.

