

One Person Can Really Make a Difference

Camille Mays is an activist, mother, and fighter for justice

by [Erin Bloodgood](#) Shepherd Express, Milwaukee, WI August 11, 2020



Camille Mays and her fiancé Greg Powell sit in front of the garden plot they maintain on Center Street and 39th Street. The plot is next to the new George Floyd and Black Lives Mater murals.

Of the many heroes in our city, Camille Mays stands out because of the tireless work she has committed to violence prevention and speaking out for our city's underrepresented neighborhoods. She is a hero because she dedicates every free moment she has to helping others. Whether she is supporting families of victims of gun violence, organizing a protest or assisting people to register to vote, she puts her community first.

Activism is her chosen work because she wants to change the systems in this country that were built on racism. She is tired of being oppressed. She explains physically seeing the neglect of the government in

her own neighborhood of Sherman Park. Trash litters the ground, potholes loom large compared to the pristine streets Downtown and school ratings don't compare to those of mostly white neighborhoods.

Mays first got involved through work she did on political campaigns, but her true passion was working directly with people in the community. She began helping people register to vote and educating them about the candidates running for office. From there, she immersed herself in the political process, learning how the system worked and going to all the public meetings that she could.

Beautify Neglected Neighborhoods

As Mays walked along city streets in neighborhoods such as Sherman Park, she would notice small memorials for people that died from gun violence and other crimes. Those small memorials were the only flowers she could see amidst the unkempt grass with scattered trash. She wanted to beautify these areas of the city that were clearly neglected, which gave her and her fiancé Greg Powell the idea to start the Peace Garden Project MKE. In this ongoing project, Mays and her fiancé work with families who have lost loved ones to crime and helps them build permanent memorials. These memorials serve multiple purposes: They bring the community together to volunteer, they give the families a way to heal and they adorn neighborhoods where residents often describe feeling forgotten by the city.

The first memorial she helped erect was in 2015. The ongoing project led her to do more work with violence prevention in Milwaukee, such as sitting on the board of Crime Stoppers and marching in protests. Then in November of 2019, the violence she had been fighting to end hit home when her son was killed by a gunman. Her world changed, but her work didn't. She vowed to fight for justice, not because of her son's death, but because she wanted to keep violence out of her community.

Fight Against Violence

Now in 2020, she continues to do everything she can to keep her followers safe. On her [Facebook Page](#), she has been posting updates about COVID-19, as well as information on how other can get involved in the fight against violence. On July 4, she spoke in a march for mothers who have buried a child, called "Mothers Leading the March." And on August 15, she is organizing an event where participants will be beating guns into garden tools to support families who have lost loved ones to homicide.

Mays has been fighting these battles for years and is glad to see protesters speaking out against systemic racism. She explains how she's been fired up for a long time and that it's about time for others to feel the same way. Whether change will finally happen in this country, she does not know. The protests need to continue until significant policies and funding are altered to help people of color, she says. The protests and support from allies cannot stop until that happens.

Most importantly, Mays emphasizes that people need to educate themselves on America's history that was left out of school curriculums. "People need to remember that the police were started as a slave patrol," she states. It's the responsibility of white people to understand the systematic oppression that has been built into our country from the beginning. Black Americans and other minorities have not had the same opportunities as whites, proven by things like redlining, police brutality and mass incarceration. "They don't understand that, and we need white people to explain it to [other white people]," says Mays. If we want a country where "all men are created equal," then we must continue to support the organizations leading the movement until real changes are actually made.

Learn more about Mays' work at www.facebook.com/peacegardenprojectMke.