

PETITION GARNERS HALF-MILLION SIGNATURES

Hunter prof helps bring down Confederate flag

By SHOMIAL AHMAD

Karen Hunter doesn't really sign petitions, much less write them. But the day after nine black worshippers at a historic black church in Charleston, South Carolina, were murdered by 21-year-old Dylann Roof, the Hunter College distinguished lecturer penned a petition to "take down the Confederate flag" from the statehouse grounds. Roof, later revealed to be a white supremacist, was shown in photos with his car, which displayed three depictions of the secessionist battle standard on its front plate, along with the words "Confederate States of America."

Hunter, a journalism teacher and frequent commentator on MSNBC, learned of the massacre as news unfolded on June 17. The next day, flags around the South Carolina Statehouse flew at half-staff, but the Confederate flag, which was reintroduced to statehouse grounds during the battle to end segregation, flew at full-staff. Hunter felt compelled to do something.

SEEMINGLY IMPOSSIBLE

"I called [South Carolina Governor] Nikki Haley's office and said, 'I'm calling to get that flag taken down from the statehouse,'" Hunter recalled. "And the woman who answered the phone was like, 'You can't do that.'"

The seemingly insuperable obstacle, at least for the receptionist, who, like Hunter, is African American, was a law that requires an act of the state legislature for the flag to be removed. Still, the receptionist routed her call to someone else in the governor's office who took note of Hunter's opposition. For Hunter, whose mother hails from Georgia and whose grandfather suffered Jim Crow in South Carolina, that wasn't enough.

"When I hung up the phone I was thinking, 'So a million people could call and nothing is going to happen,'" Hunter told *Clarion*, which led her to ask, "What can I do?"

What she did was write a petition. Her inner editor told her what she constantly tells her journalism students at Hunter College: "Keep it simple, stupid." So she wrote a few direct sentences, published the petition via MoveOn.org, posted it on social media and went about her day.

A SIMPLE PETITION

The petition simply read, "Symbols of hate and division have no place in our government. It's time to stand up for what's right and take down the Confederate flag!" The petition collected more than half a million signatures. As the effort gained media attention, pressure mounted on lawmakers. Five days after the massacre, Governor Nikki Haley called for removing the flag from the grounds of the state capitol. "A hundred and fifty years after the end of the Civil War, the time has come," Haley said at a press conference, passing the flag's fate to the state legislature where, weeks later, by a two-thirds majority in both chambers, re-



Karen Hunter speaks in front of the South Carolina Statehouse prior to delivering signed petitions to lawmakers, calling for the flag's removal from the capitol grounds.

moval of the flag from statehouse grounds was approved. By the end of July 10, the day the flag came down, Hunter's petition bore 572,439 signatures.

ESCALATING PRESSURE

In the weeks following the Charleston church shooting, businesses including Walmart and eBay banned the sale of Confederate flags and related items. Ac-

tivist Bree Newsome scaled the 30-foot statehouse pole and brought the flag down with her as an act of protest. Jenny Horne, a Republican state lawmaker, gave an impassioned speech to her colleagues to remove the "symbol of hate," while everyday people from Gaston, South Carolina, to Loganville, Georgia, to Elysburg, Pennsylvania, signed the petition to take down the flag. Three days before the flag came

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down, Hunter and other activists holding boxes of her signed petition delivered them to Governor Haley's office.

As host of "The Karen Hunter Show," a two-hour-long radio program on SiriusXM's Urban View channel, Hunter offered a platform for the developing debate over the Southern battle standard.

Hunter refers to her show as an "action show," not a talk show. "I've always explored what's next, solutions and what we can do" as participants in civic life, Hunter told *Clarion*, from one of SiriusXM's conference rooms in Midtown Manhattan. She punctuated her points with taps on the table. "I didn't want to be the kind of shrill [commentator] that just railed on topics and did not bring people some hope [that they're] able to do something," she said.

AN 'ACTION SHOW'

Hunter worked the Confederate flag topic on her show, inviting guests like Grady Brown, a South Carolina state representative and great-grandson of a Confederate soldier, and Bakari Sellers, a former South Carolina state lawmaker and son of a 1960s civil rights activist. Both wanted the flag removed. She also tweeted the names of state lawmakers who opposed the flag's removal and urged her listeners to reach out to them. Ultimately, those listeners helped bring the flag down. Once the petition had gathered a momentum of its own, Hunter told her listeners on a June 22 radio show, "This wasn't a Karen Hunter thing; it was a y'all thing."

Still, Hunter sees the removal of the Confederate flag as but a small step. "A petition isn't going to change a racist heart, but it did get the flag down," Hunter told her audience. "And that may not change a racist heart, but at least it sends a message to the people who live in this country that our lives do matter. And we shouldn't be disrespected."

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Hunter can get didactic on her show when she's imparting a truth that she's discovered or encouraging her listeners to make changes in their own personal lives. She conveys the same mix of life lessons and journalism in the classes she teaches at the college she coincidentally shares a name with. Her concrete goals are to have students master the lede, the opening sentence in a story. She wants students to be able to explain why a story matters, why it's newsworthy. But she also wants her students to get out of their cocoons and learn to connect with people, because it's through other people that they will find their stories and tell their stories. It's partly that connection to her audience, to her students and to others, she said, that led her to write the petition and to learn some things herself.

"It taught me that people are incredibly powerful when they come together and that there is strength in numbers," Hunter said. "Sometimes you can simply state a message and come together around it and change things."

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