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Richmond police chief a prominent participant in protest against police violence

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RICHMOND -- Amid the nationwide tumult over recent instances of police officers using deadly force against unarmed people, Bay Area cities like Berkeley and Oakland have been rived by impassioned protests that have at times turned violent.

But a different kind of protest popped up in Richmond on Tuesday, and at the vanguard of the gathering calling for a reduction in police violence in communities of color was an unlikely participant: Richmond's police chief.

"I've never seen anything like it, not in Richmond, not anywhere," said longtime resident Mary Square, who stood on the north side of Macdonald Avenue watching the protesters on the south side of the street. "All these police, and the police chief, holding signs calling for an end to police violence. ... I'm going to tell my kids."



Richmond Chief of Police Chris Magnus stands with demonstrators along Macdonald Ave. to protest the Michael Brown and Eric Garner deaths during a peaceful demonstration in Richmond, Calif., on Tuesday, Dec. 9, 2014. (Kristopher Skinner/Bay Area News Group) (Kristopher Skinner)

About 100 protesters lined Macdonald Avenue at 41st Street by noon Tuesday, holding signs and listening to a stereo that boomed speeches by Martin Luther King Jr.

Police Chief Chris Magnus, who has drawn acclaim for his community-policing approach and helping drive down both crime and use of force by his officers in recent years, was front and center, facing the street while holding a white sign that said "#blacklivesmatter." The photo quickly went viral on social media, the image of the uniformed chief with the popular hashtag a stark contrast to the anti-police sentiment many associate with it.

"I spoke with my command staff, and we agreed it would be nice to convey our commitment to peaceful protest and that black and brown lives do matter," Magnus said after the protest. "And to help bridge the gap that we understand sometimes exists between police and community around certain issues."

The protest was hastily organized by members of the RYSE Youth Center nearby. Members vowed to stay on the sidewalk with their signs and their "hands up," an ode to Michael Brown,

the 18-year-old shot and killed by a Ferguson, Missouri, police officer earlier this year, for 4½ hours, the time Brown's body lay in the street after his death.

"It's important that Richmond be seen as part of this peace movement," said RYSE Executive Director Kimberly Aceves. "Because black and brown lives matter, and because this country and this world continue to act as if they don't."

The protest was also notable because of its relative calm and the presence of other leaders like Mayor Gayle McLaughlin and council members Jael Myrick, Jovanka Beckles and Tom Butt.

Deputy Chief Allwyn Brown, a few paces away, said the chief's participation sent a clear message.

"We get the conversation about use of force, we get it," Brown said. "This is an opportunity for all police departments, including ours, to look inward and examine our approaches and get better."

The protest even won over converts. When RYSE officials began spreading the word Monday using social media, Councilman Butt, who was elected mayor on Nov. 4, sent Aceves an email criticizing her decision to organize a protest.

"The situation you are protesting does not exist now in Richmond because we have all been proactive in making sure our police department is well-trained and sensitive," Butt wrote. "I would hope there would be some way to celebrate our successes rather than protesting other cities' failures."

Butt also warned against the cost of paying officers overtime to keep the peace and the potential of violence and property damage.

But when the protest went off without a hitch, Butt showed up all smiles, to the surprise of participants.

"Nothing really changed my mind, this is fine." Butt said. "Everybody has worked really hard to make Richmond a different place than Ferguson or New York City, and I think we need to show people, 'Look, be like us,' rather than trying to appear like we have the same problems everybody else does."