

OCCUPY COLUMBIA



by Judi Burton

It began with the financial district at Wall Street: a call to action, using civil disobedience and demonstrations. The mission was to protest the lack of accountability for fraud and economic crimes that contributed to the economic crash, and to rally against the huge and growing disparity between the obscene wealth of the very few and the despair of the other 99 percent of the American population. The traditional media call it a rag-tag group of modern hippies trying to initiate a class war to attack the rich, when many see the war as having begun long ago by the rich, who have been winning. The disparity in wealth and income between a few extremely rich and the rest of the population is at its greatest since before the Great Depression.

The Wall Street protest, called Occupy Wall Street, has grown to a worldwide one, inspired by the Arab Spring uprisings that sought to depose tyrants and inhumane governments to right the wrongs of their society. In South Carolina, protesters join more than 1,800 cities across the world that answered the call to meet in solidarity with the Occupy Wall Street movement on Oct. 15, Global Day of Action. Occupy

Columbia is a part of that movement.

A small group of diverse individuals in Columbia gathered and discussed the organization of Occupy Columbia to plan for the Day of Action. Travis Bland, a 23-year-old University of South Carolina history major graduate, was one of the first organizers, having met a group at a potluck dinner discussing the Occupy Wall Street movement. From within that very American tradition of a dish-to-pass party, Occupy Columbia sprouted. A day later, Brandon Moody created the Occupy Columbia Facebook page to promote the idea to the public. About

100 people showed up on Oct. 9 at Finlay Park for an informational meeting. During the meeting, several committees were put together and put in charge of specific duties, such as food, safety, sanitation, photography, PR, legal, and even a street team in charge of passing out flyers. Social media has played a major role in getting the message out, since corporate-controlled media has done much to diminish and denigrate the movement.

All of the protests are strictly nonviolent protests. A letter written by the group was sent to the Columbia Police Department stating the purpose of

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the march, and a portion of the letter reads:

Occupy Columbia would like to invite you to participate with us and not against us. We are school teachers, we are students, we are the elderly, we are children, we are shopkeepers, we are police officers, and we are nearly every person you see in the grocery store or walking down the street. We are your friends, and we are strangers. We are all races, and we are all creeds. We are the middle class, and we are the poor. We stand united for the principles of democracy that we hold so dear, so that every voice can be heard. We are the 99%.

As of this writing, Occupy Columbia, to be held on state property downtown, expects about 200 people to show up, with more joining in as the movement continues and spreads. The occupiers do not have a set date of dispersal, and many will camp or sleep out overnight on the lawn. The intent is peaceful resistance, demonstrations and lawful expression; and if they are told they cannot camp, they have promised to obey peacefully, hoping to work with the police to find a suitable area to camp for the overnight demonstration activities.

While the larger Occupy Wall Street movement attendees nationwide express a broad spectrum of economic ideas, the major point of view is that wealthy corporations and the richest 1 percent are controlling the government and the democracy, which we as Americans cherish, through lobbying and campaign contributions. The rest of the population—the common working people—are suffering as the economy falters, and the flow of cash disappears into the vaults and coffers of a few.

“I was attracted to the movement because I felt close to what they were promoting,” Bland said. “It feels like

our social system cannot survive anymore when corporate money has more value than the voice of the people. We want to change the culture in which money equals representation and re-enfranchise people that have been disfranchised. It’s setting forth a new model for government and giving people back a voice. We are collectively taking a stand. At the end of the day, you have to ask yourself who does our government work for, corpora-



tions or the people it has been sworn to protect?” Cammie Kennedy, a 31-year-old originally from Kansas, is one of the individuals who was first to join Occupy Columbia. “I do feel the government is not acting on behalf of the bottom 99 percent,” she said. “We are losing jobs and paying more for health care, while the rich are just getting richer. The average employee got an average 2.1 percent wage increase this last year, and the average CEO got a wage increase of 27 percent. That’s a huge gap! Why are teachers and union workers being asked to sacrifice so much and the top earners are not being asked to sacrifice anything?”

The State Legislature is not in session now and won’t be back until January, but the Occupiers are hopeful that they can drum up enough publicity to get their voices heard. In addition to Columbia, all of the other larger SC cities and communities are participating. “We hope that you will take the time out to come by the Statehouse and stand in solidarity with us and the 99 percent across the world that wish to have a voice again,” Bland said.

To find an Occupy movement close to you, visit OccupyTogether.org. To learn more about Occupy Columbia, search for it on Facebook or visit OccupyColumbiaSC.org. The 1 percent control much of the mainstream media, but social media and the Internet can still reach the people. Reach out with your message.

