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Impact of one
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In prayer, mob yields to peace

By Karen Samples

Before the riots, before the cameras, before the big shots rode into Cincinnati, there was **Tracie Hunter**.

Her name hasn't appeared in the papers. Her face is barely visible in one photo from this month's unrest: Head bowed, she is praying at the edge of a crowd.

That picture was taken April 14, the day shooting victim Timothy Thomas was buried. Dominating the scene is NAACP President Kweisi Mfume, arms raised in supplication. You might think Mr. Mfume brought the multitudes together. You would be wrong.

It was Ms. **Hunter**'s vision and the faith of many others that set the stage for Saturday's drama. Days later, participants are still amazed. Some say it was the most extraordinary event they ever witnessed

Day of the funeral

At first, people tried to talk Ms. **Hunter** out of it.

An elegant and composed 34-year-old, she's the general manager of WCVG, a Christian radio station in Covington. Two days after the unrest began, she proposed a prayer rally for the day of the funeral.

"I said, 'Oh no, not Saturday!'" recalled Cecil Thomas, director of the Cincinnati Human Relations Commission. "But she was adamant. She said this is what God had put on her heart."

Ms. **Hunter** also contacted Allen Wilkinson of Elsmere. For nearly three years, Mr. Wilkinson, Ms. **Hunter** and various ministers have led monthly prayer walks through troubled neighborhoods.

Ms. **Hunter** wanted to do the same on Saturday, only bigger.

"I said, 'Oh my God. How are we going to do that? She doesn't even have a location!'" Mr. Wilkinson recalled.

One day before the walk, Ms. **Hunter** was promoting it on WAKW, the Cincinnati station that had agreed to help. While she was on the air, her cell phone rang: Taft High School had agreed to open its doors.

The next day, 800 people gathered in the school's auditorium. Ms. **Hunter** warned that there would be distractions outside. Keep the focus on prayer, she said.

Meanwhile, a storm was brewing near Findlay Market.

Angry meet prayerful

Police had fired beanbags into an apparently peaceful group leaving Timothy Thomas' funeral, agitating hundreds of people.

"They started screaming at me, 'You see how they treat us? We're going to tear this city up!'" Cecil Thomas recalled.

Then he had an idea. With support from police, he suggested the mob join the group at Taft High School to air its grievances. He didn't mention prayer would be involved.

The agitators followed his lead. Mr. Thomas laughs with delight as he tells the story.

"By the time they got to the front (of the prayer walk then in progress), they were all blended in," he said. "There were still shouting, 'No justice, no peace!' but what was coming out of the other folks' mouths were songs of praise - 'Jesus! Jesus!' "

The mob lost its bearings as everyone moved into Washington Park. People raised their arms and shouted hymns.

In the back, pastors quietly talked with still-angry youths. Some stuffed their protest signs into their pockets. Others quietly drifted away.

Ms. **Hunter**, just another person in the crowd, simply prayed.