

A President Visits Guilford, Maine:  
Excerpts from an Interview with Ruth Griffith  
Voices from HOME Oral History Project

**Narrator:** Ruth Griffith

**Interviewer:** Jason Curran

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**Place:** Sangerville, Maine

**RG:** I'm Ruth Griffith. I live in Parkman, Maine, which is one town over from Guilford, and I'm sixteen years old. In the middle of March I was in school, and then they told us that we were going to have a two-week break from school because of the COVID-19 pandemic. I don't think it was called the pandemic at that time, but we took a break from school. They told us that we wouldn't be coming back until the next school year in the fall, but we didn't really know any specifics about what was going to happen in the future. We were just told to stay away from people and wear masks when we were in close contact with anyone.

I didn't see my friends, and I haven't seen most of them, for the last six months because it's almost September right now. We've been in contact with different forms of social media, especially Snapchat and FaceTime, so I can still see them, and hear their voice, and everything like that, just not any in-person interaction. It definitely felt--I would say sad, but I also knew that it wouldn't last forever, and that I could still communicate with my friends in many ways. So it wasn't like I was completely socially-isolated. I looked at the maps every day, of where new cases were popping up, and where they were having spikes, and then I just looked at the news every day to see what was going on. Mostly just the news, like with the Apple news app, as well as--my mom's always playing NPR, and whatever I see on TV or in the newspaper.

**JC:** Are topics of the administration, impeachment, are these things that you talk about with your friends?

**RG:** No. No, most of my friends aren't that concerned with any of those things.

**JC:** The instances of Ahmaud Arbery, and then later George Floyd?

**RG:** I think that those two instances definitely sparked a lot of conversation, but my friends and I were definitely on opposing sides. Because I thought that "All Lives Matter" soon as "Black Lives Matter," because white people are not being targeted because of the color of their skin, but people of color are. And my friends did not see it the same way as I did. So a lot of them just said, "White Lives Matter" and "All Lives Matter." They didn't really express more than that.

**JC:** Did you ever take the conversation any further than that?

**RG:** I've tried, but not successfully.

I heard that the President was going to come to Guilford, maybe like a week in advance. I saw it first on someone's Snapchat story, and then I Googled it right after that and found out that it was true. At that point he didn't know whether he was going to visit Guilford or Pittsfield, so I knew that he would be coming to our general area. I felt kind of neutral at that point, because I didn't know that there would be any organized event for protesting or anything like that. So I just wanted to see how things developed in the following days.

I decided that I wanted to be in Guilford as soon as I knew that there was going to be some sort of organized protest where there would be other people there for the same purpose. And I decided that I wanted to go because I think that it's important to speak up in situations of injustice, and I think that protesting is a very good way to do that. I think what motivated all of this to happen was when George Floyd died, and I think that was one of the major motivations. And then it's just about trying to end systematic injustices, and systematic racism in the United States.

**JC:** Did you have any conversation with your friends about the visit? Did they have opinions about it?

**RG:** Yeah. They were super excited because most of them are very avid Trump supporters. So a lot of them got flags to put on their trucks, and were super enthusiastic. I put it on my Snapchat story, just saying that I would be there, and then I had a few other friends comment to me after that they wanted to be there too. Or if they couldn't be there, they were giving supportive comments about that. I didn't get any negative backlash after that, no. I don't think that it would really change my relationships with other people because we don't talk that much about politics. We leave that separate in our friendships, but it definitely is important to know what other people's opinions of different things are.

I definitely read a lot of threats, but I didn't think that any of them were going to be acted upon. I think that it was just people being angry and using social media as a way to express how they felt in a very non-constructive way. I didn't think that there would be any violence happening, because we are such a small area and because I knew that there would be a lot of law enforcement there. But it definitely was a possibility that something could happen.

I didn't really plan anything else out until the morning of June fifth. Then I went to the [Unitarian Universalist] Church [of Sangerville and Dover-Foxcroft] and I made a sign. It said "Enough is Enough" on one side, and "Black Lives Matter" on the other side. From there, I went to downtown Guilford and stood with all the other protesters. One of my friends was also there, so I stood next to her. Around ten a.m., maybe eleven. At that point, there was maybe a little cluster of twenty people there with the Black Lives Matter movement, and then a much larger crowd there in support of Donald Trump.

Okay, so there were a few helicopters that came in, like a few days before the President showed up, I think. And then that day, more helicopters flew in. Then after that, once the President's helicopter came, they put him in the motorcade, and then they had a big line of various vehicles, of law enforcement and people who were there with various equipment. I think it took like five or six minutes for all the cars to pass down the street, and they were going a very slow parade-like speed. Then the President was one of the last cars, and as soon as he got close people were screaming, and they were very excited. Most of the Black Lives Matter protesters got down on one knee and were holding their signs there, as to be respectful but make sure that it was known that they were not in support of him.

I thought that it was really cool. The helicopters were definitely fun to watch. I think that everybody agreed, no matter what side they were on, that was a very interesting part of the day. A lot of people were very excited that they had that going on the day that they graduated at Guilford High School [Piscataquis Community High School]. Yeah, so the graduation happened later that night--I think at like seven p.m. or something like that. But definitely a lot of the things in the town closed down for the day. A lot of businesses closed down. I think the mill itself wasn't operating for a while, while he visited. A lot of people had concerns about traffic and getting through, so they cancelled different things. A lot of the kids thought that having the President at their school, or having snipers on the roof of their school, was super-exciting to happen on their graduation day. It doesn't happen a lot.

**JC:** Did you see the President?

**RG:** I did. So I saw him twice. Once when he drove by, going to Hardwood Products, and once when he drove away back to his helicopter. Both times he was just waving at everybody and looking at us. I don't think that he really acknowledged that we weren't in support of him, because the large majority of people were all decked out in their Trump apparel, and their MAGA [Make America Great Again] hats, and everything like that.

Throughout the day there was a lot of commotion between Black Lives Matter protesters and Trump supporters. There were law enforcement everywhere, so nothing got violent at all. It was just verbal communication.

**JC:** What kind of commotion in particular?

**RG:** So a lot of people were very negative about wearing masks, which almost all of the Black Lives Matter protesters had on and very few of the Trump supporters had on. So there was a lot of controversy about that. Later throughout the day, Black Lives Matter people started chanting things like "Black Lives Matter" and "No Justice, No Peace," things like that. And then that was met with a lot of comments that didn't really make sense. Like we got a lot of "Get off of welfare" and "Get a job" comments. We got a few "I'd grab you by the pussy" comments, which were definitely not appreciated. And then a few people just saying "All Lives Matter" and expressing their opinion about that.

A lot of people were saying that masks aren't necessary; we shouldn't be wearing them; it's not really a big deal; that COVID-19 is no worse than the common flu, or that the entire thing is just a hoax. Most of the time we didn't respond to those comments, or we just said, "Thank you for your opinion; we're going to wear our masks," because we didn't want to start any fight.

So there wasn't that big of a crowd that there was an issue for space. The only physical contact that I had were a few people with Trump flags that tried to wave them in our faces as we were walking down the street with our signs. There were a handful of people who brought their guns to downtown Guilford that day, and I know that they were in communication with all of the law enforcement there to make sure that they didn't have them loaded or anything like that. I didn't feel unsafe in any way because of that, but I definitely think that it wasn't a necessary thing to have there, to show their right of open carry. I think that it was a little bit uncomfortable for many people, especially because of the large presence of law enforcement there anyway. To have citizens with their guns out was a little bit uneasy, but it didn't really bother me that much.

I wish that it was more centralized, or that the protests all happened in Guilford, because I think that is where most of the news coverage was. The whole idea of protesting is to get your opinion heard, and you need media sources to do that. But I

think that that just happened because of all the threats that people were giving to people who did attempt to organize these events. But I decided to go to Guilford instead of going to Dover or Bangor because that's where the President was going, and I think it would be more impactful to be where he was.

A lot of people on the opposing side came up to me and asked me about the masks, and I kind of just dismissed that in a very--as respectful way as I could. And then there were a lot of other comments talking about religion and why we think that "Black Lives Matter" instead of "All Lives Matter." And then quite a few people walked over to where I was standing and asked about completely unrelated issues, like health care and abortion. Which, I just said, "Have a nice day," and didn't engage.

There was a little bit of them trying to understand the conversation, but most people were very set in what they already believed in, and they were just arguing for whatever they believed prior to coming. For people that I was protesting with, we were all fairly like-minded people. We disagreed on a few little things. I met one girl who was from Rhode Island and she drove up here after she got her COVID test to protest. She had a lot of insight, definitely, about what she had seen throughout the country protesting, which was really cool to hear. They experienced a lot more violence where she was. And then I talked to a lot of other locals who were there, and a lot of them had similar feelings to me, just that they wanted to voice their opinions about the Black Lives Matter movement and do it in a way that would get their voices heard.

Yeah, so it definitely made me very mad when people said comments that were just ignorant or not at all related to why we were there. There were a few people who had good conversations that I think are great to have, but there were a lot of people who were there just to start controversy and to make people angry. Like I said before: "Get off of welfare," and "Get a real job," things about healthcare and abortion, people saying they would want to grab me by the pussy. So I didn't respond to anyone who made those sort of comments, because I think that the majority of people that were there as Trump supporters would just say comments like "Trump 2020" or "All Lives Matter" or "White Lives Matter," which I disagree with, but I think that it's them just stating what they believe in politically, which is exactly what I was doing just for a different side. But it made me mad when people said things that were not at all related, or were definitely not respectful.

There were a lot of local police officers, as well as a lot of people from the border control. I think that they were very respectful to everyone there. None of them obviously chose a side of where they would stand, they were just in like their uniforms. When the President drove by, they were a little bit more focused on keeping the Black Lives Matter protesters away from the street, but I think that's somewhat reasonable. Overall

the presence of all law enforcement was very respectful and they treated everyone equally.

I think that our area is definitely mostly very, very conservative. And I think that throughout the entire country, everything's very polarized of either your left or your right. So having a more liberal opinion in this area is often frowned upon, or people don't talk about it a lot, because it's not the majority of people's opinions.

The friend I was with had graduated. I think she's twenty years old, so she's a little bit older than I am. But there were quite a few high schoolers from [the] Dexter and Dover high school(s) [Dexter Regional High School and Foxcroft Academy], which are the two surrounding area schools. But I believe that I was the only current student of Guilford High School who was there. There were quite a few people, though, who were in their early twenties who had graduated from high school at Guilford who were there as Black Lives Matter protesters. And then there was an abundance of people who were there who were my age or younger who were there as Trump supporters with their parents.

During the day that I was there protesting, a lot of people from the community would give us thumbs up or peace signs in support of us and what we were doing, and then very positive comments like "You go guys," or "I love what you're doing," "I love your sign," anything like that. After the fact, a lot of my friends were saying how proud they were that we were doing something. Before they were like "Stay safe," "I might go," "I don't know yet, I haven't made up my mind," stuff like that. But in general, I didn't receive any overly-negative feedback from my peers. It definitely made me feel like more of the minority because I know a lot of people who wanted to go who are my age, but were just fearful of being different, I think, so they didn't go. But I definitely lost a lot of respect for some people I knew who made comments that were not respectful whatsoever to other people. Yeah, just people who I knew from the community.

I think that the election right now could go either way, being that Trump could win or that Biden could win. I think that we won't really have a good idea until the day it happens, unless any major events change the political climate. I think that most people are very set on who they want to vote for because of how polarized politics are in America right now. So I think that won't really change anything.

**JC:** How do you think things will change?

**RG:** I think any major events that happen will change things, as well as--most people, I think, who are younger tend to lean a little bit more to the left than people who are older, just in general, and people in urban areas definitely tend to be a lot more democratic as well. So I think that a lot more people will start leaning that way, and that there will be

less controversy between which side. But I think that it will never really change. For as long as we have a two-party system in America, there's always going to be one side and another side, and it's not really going to change.

I think that for our elections, if we didn't want as much political polarization, we would definitely need time for people to adjust to everything, as well as just more parties, or just abolishment of all political parties. Because right now you either align yourself with one or the other, so it's very easy to pick a side and become very--I don't know what the word would be, but become very supportive of just that side. Yeah, I think that running on what people want to do once they are in an office, and what they as a person believe in, is definitely a lot better than what party they're behind. Especially people who vote on certain key topics. It would lead to a lot, I think, better representation. I don't think that I will go into politics in the future, no [laughs].