

UW Huskies use platform to fight for social justice, promote voter registration

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One by one, members of the Washington men's basketball team appeared in black and white. They sat alone, empty wall behind them, as bold words flashed on the screen.

Exhausted. Discouraged. Angry.

Change. Justice. Equality.

The video was released in early September from the Huskies' Twitter account. The accompanying message read, in part: "We stand together to demand change. The fight for justice & equality never ends."

The video was a product of a Zoom session, one of several the team has held with faculty athletic representative [Alexes Harris](#) over the past few months to discuss social justice issues and voting. The calls started in May, shortly after [George Floyd was killed in police custody](#) in Minneapolis. Head coach Mike Hopkins was looking for a way to help his players, and the meetings not only sparked conversation but also activism.

Since then, both players and coaches have been particularly active in the community.

In early June, assistant coach Will Conroy organized a parent and child forum on racial injustice and inequality. Several high-profile Seattle sports figures attended or spoke, including Hopkins, Isaiah Thomas and the Seattle Storm's Breanna Stewart and Jewell Lloyd.

During the event, Hopkins brought up the Zoom calls. Conroy, he said, was the person who told him they couldn't talk about basketball the day after Floyd's death.

"All the players were able to speak and I was surprised at what I was hearing," Hopkins said at the forum. "I felt out of touch (with) things I should know about my players. That goes back to the next thing. I wanted to come here to listen and learn. I'm talking about education. Learning. Understanding.

"I'll never understand how Will actually feels, but I can learn why. And most importantly, I know I can make a difference with my platform. This is all about leadership, right? This is about standing up and making a difference."

This summer, a group of former and current men's basketball players launched a fundraiser benefiting nonprofits that focus on prison and criminal justice reform. The project, led by former

walk-on Jason Crandall, has raised more than \$1,800 for the Equal Justice Initiative, Seattle Clemency Project and Community Passageways.

Hopkins was particularly interested in providing action steps. The men's basketball program is 46 for 46 when it comes to voter registration, a number that includes players, coaches, graduate assistants and other staff.

Harris and the men's and women's basketball teams recently walked around UW's campus to encourage people to register to vote. While wearing T-shirts with a scan code that took people to the voter registration site, players handed out information on how to register.

Redshirt sophomore Nate Roberts said the idea stemmed from a single question — “How can we make a difference in our community, not just for ourselves but beyond ourselves?”

“It kind of just started off as a talk and brainstorming ideas of what we wanted to do, what message we wanted to portray out to the community,” Roberts said. “We came up with that. One day we all planned, got shirts, got masks, got papers and stuff and encouraged people to come out and vote or register to vote. Make sure they did all the proper things because no voice should be unheard in this situation.”

‘I THINK IT’S A NEAT MOMENT’

The words in the Twitter video weren't random, weren't chosen by someone else and simply read aloud.

These words were personal.

They stemmed from an early Zoom session Harris, who asked players to choose three words that described how they were feeling. Hopkins requested that Harris speak to the team after Floyd's death as protests against racial injustice spread across the country.

Not only is Harris the faculty athletic rep, she's also the chair of UW's Advisory Committee on Intercollegiate Athletics. A professor of sociology who teaches an introductory course on social problems and an upper-level race and ethnicity class, Harris' research focuses on the juvenile and criminal justice system.

“I'm a Black woman,” Harris said. “I studied the criminal justice system. I'm the FAR. I teach. (Hopkins) thought it was appropriate. I actually told him, I'm not going to be the FAR in this conversation because I was still in a lot of pain.”

“(UW athletic director) Jen Cohen really cares about talking through these issues and has created or fostered an environment where we have this space. She's invited me to speak at a couple of their coaches' meetings: One about trying to understand state-sponsored violence and how it's situated within our criminal justice system and our history. And also how can we talk about race and equity and not be offensive and engage in thoughtful but hard conversation.”

Professional athletes — from Colin Kaepernick to the WNBA and NBA as a whole — have provided college athletes with a road map for how to use their voices. Young athletes are now growing more comfortable in that space, Harris said.

“There are good role models that show them like, we don’t just have to be entertainment,” said Harris, who is from Seattle and attended Garfield High School and UW before getting her PhD from UCLA. “We can have valid experiences from multiple angles and we should express that. I think it’s a neat moment. I think every university should support like we do at the University of Washington, all of our student-athletes, in whatever statements they want to make and take a stand. We just want to make sure that they’re educated on the issues and understand that not everyone’s going to agree with them.”

Said Cohen: “Because she’s so passionate about social justice issues, she’s somebody that our student-athletes really respect because many of them have had her (in class),” Cohen said. “I think she’s a voice that really resonates with a lot of our students and her staff.”

This summer, a group of Pac-12 football players formed #WeAreUnited and threatened to boycott the season unless their demands — they included fair treatment, safety regulations amid the COVID-19 pandemic, revenue sharing and an end to racial injustice in college athletics — were met. Other conferences, including the Big Ten, launched similar movements.

“I really commend all the athletes across the country,” Roberts said. “Not just football and basketball, but all the other sports that don’t always get recognized for stepping up and using their voice and not being shy or scared to speak up because their voice does have value and our voice does have value as student-athletes. Definitely shout out to everybody that’s been pushing the envelope.”

With the beginning of the season looming on Nov. 25, the Huskies know their platform is about to get even bigger. With that in mind, Roberts said the team captains and leaders have held frequent conversations about their next steps.

“Nobody wants to see what’s going on in the world and what happens over and over again with racism and police brutality and social justice and systematic racism and stuff like that,” Roberts said. “She’s allowed us to say, ‘it’s OK to feel that way’ and she vouches for us. And she’s there. She’s always open. She’s always said that she’s a call or a text or an email away. She’s really allowed us to have that space with her.”

Harris said giving players the opportunity “to feel whatever they are feeling” is always her goal.

“I think that’s what Coach Hopkins wanted,” Harris said. “In all of these conversations, it’s giving them space to express where they’re coming from, that pain.

“All of our teams are diverse, especially basketball and football. It’s giving a space for students of color or Black young men and women to voice their fear and their pain. It’s also having the white students engage and say, I don’t understand and learning from their Black peers. But their

Black peers also learning from the white peers on what they don't understand and what they don't get, and how they can translate that for them.”

That first Zoom meeting, Roberts said, “set the standard” for every important conversation.

“Everybody was going through a rough time, not just the Black players, not just the Black coaches,” Roberts said. “Everybody was feeling what the world was feeling. I think it was very important that everybody's voice was heard.

“That's the biggest thing in this whole social justice movement. It's letting your voice be heard and being able to have those open conversations, tough conversations, about how you feel and where your mind is taking you and how angry you are and how upset you are that this keeps happening and happening and happening. It's frustrating.”

‘HAVE THAT OPEN EAR’

Hopkins said Harris' sessions have been educational for him, too.

“I'm 51 years old and it was a learning experience for me,” Hopkins said. “For an 18-, 19-, 20-year-old kids to understand how to really make a difference. If you believe in police reform, who is their boss? How do you find out what they believe? All those types of things.

“Really understanding that and educating our kids. I think that's the most important thing is we're constantly educating, you're constantly listening and learning and that's how you grow. That's what we've been focused on.”

As she leads the conversations, Harris' hope is that coaches will learn to implement her strategies. Every time Hopkins reached out to Harris, word would spread to other coaches. With 22 teams at UW, Harris said it's recently been better to hold two or three big sessions instead of doing individual meetings.

She suggested the men's basketball team watch [Ava DuVernay's documentary “13th”](#) — which explores the history of racial inequality in the United States — and then hosted a discussion. She talked to the team about voting, too. While there is a Pac-12 voting initiative and the NCAA declared a day off Nov. 3, Harris offered players non-partisan information about their ballots on a state, city and county level.

And Harris doesn't shy away from asking specific questions to Black students, white students, students of color or Native American students. She'll often address students by name and ask what they're thinking. On a recent call, she noticed Hopkins following her lead.

“It was great to see that in (Hopkins') position and him being a white male in America, be willing and offering his time and offering his ear to hear out what was really going on,” Roberts said. “He only can understand if you have those conversations and he can sympathize and empathize with you. Have that open ear.

“He’s been nothing but amazing with having that open ear and listening to Black players on the team and Black coaches on the team and learning more about why we feel this way and why we act the way we act and why is it we do what we do. It’s because of the continuous years of systematic racism and oppression. It’s been nothing but great with him.”