

Occupy Knoxville supporters advocate for economic equality

Occupy Knoxville rally brings New York movement to ET

By Suzanna McCloskey

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At least 200 East Tennesseans Friday evening joined the hundreds of thousands of Occupy Wall Street protesters around the country aiming to challenge economic inequality and raise awareness of the gap that exists between the rich and poor.

Occupy Knoxville supporters gathered in Krutch Park chanting phrases like "people over profits" and then led a candlelight solidarity march around downtown.

Sevierville's Betsey Rochelle said she heard about Occupy Knoxville on Facebook and came up with the idea for the march, although she wasn't the only organizer.

"It's time people all over the country start to support the Wall Street movement in New York. Everyone's been asleep at the wheel for a while. Now people are waking up, and they want a voice," Rochelle said. "We need to get the corporate money out of our politics."

In New York, where the Occupy Wall Street movement got its start, protesters and police have clashed on occasion, but Rochelle said she wasn't worried about any trouble with Knoxville police.

"We've coordinated this with the police. They cooperated with us, and we're going to cooperate with them. We're a peaceful bunch," Rochelle said.

Rochelle said she hopes Occupy Knoxville raises awareness that the average American doesn't have a voice in the U.S. political process.

Don Fritz, a Fort Sanders resident, attended the rally with a sign reading, "During Vietnam, I fought for my country. Now I am fighting my country for decent jobs."

Fritz has worked as a custodian for the past four years but is now concerned his job could be outsourced.

"I don't have sympathy for the rich. I fight for the working poor," Fritz said.

Suzanne Coile of East Knoxville said she took part in the march because she works with some 140,000 dislocated workers across Tennessee.

"We gave breaks to big banks so they could create jobs. Instead, they saved the money and now have billions in their coffers," Coile said. "We have millions of people who are losing their homes and jobs, and it just irritates me so much to hear (the rich) are getting even bigger bonuses."

Some people, like Lynn Sacco of South Knoxville, said they supported the movement simply because they're American.

"I'm an ordinary person who's employed, and I'm sick to death of America protecting corporate profits and not ordinary Americans," she said. "Why should Americans struggle in the richest democracy in the world?"

Sacco said she is angry that Americans seem more interested in slogans than actions when jobs are continuously lost to globalization and technology.

"Americans are not corporations. They're people," Sacco said.

The Old City's Norris Dryer said he was fascinated at how much social media can impact social and political movements. More than 1,200 Facebook users had liked the Occupy Knoxville page as of Friday night.

Dryer said he participated in the rally because he's tired of how apathetic people seem about American government.

"People have allowed the system to walk all over us," he said. "We had a horrible turnout in the local elections, and it's hard to come up with an exact theory — whether people don't care or have given up."

The Occupy Knoxville movement continues today with a meeting at 1 p.m. in Krutch Park.



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