

THE RIDGEWOOD NEWS

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 3, 2004

50 CENTS

Local activists join anti-Bush protest marches

BY BRIAN LEVINSON
Correspondent

Last Sunday, when Zach Hershman crossed the George Washington Bridge to spend a day in Manhattan, he was not driving in to see a show or go to a museum. In fact, he wasn't driving at all. Hershman crossed the bridge on foot, with more than a hundred sign-wielding protesters, and escorted by a long line of Port Authority police vehicles.

The march was, for Hershman and the others, just the beginning of a long day of activism that would span from Greenwich Village to Central Park, and connect them with the hundreds of thousands of people who were also voicing their discontent with the Bush administration on the day before the Republican National Convention.

The protesters, including adolescents, young adults, senior citizens, and whole families, set off from Fort Lee's Constitution Park at 10 a.m. They carried signs that

'People were confident, energetic and happy, and that's a good environment to create.

For us, protests are supposed to be a microcosm of the future that we want.'

Zach Hershman

read "Kick Bush in the Tush" and "Say No to the Bush Agenda." Observers from the National Lawyers Guild, wearing prominent neon green caps, were on hand to advise the marchers of their legal rights.

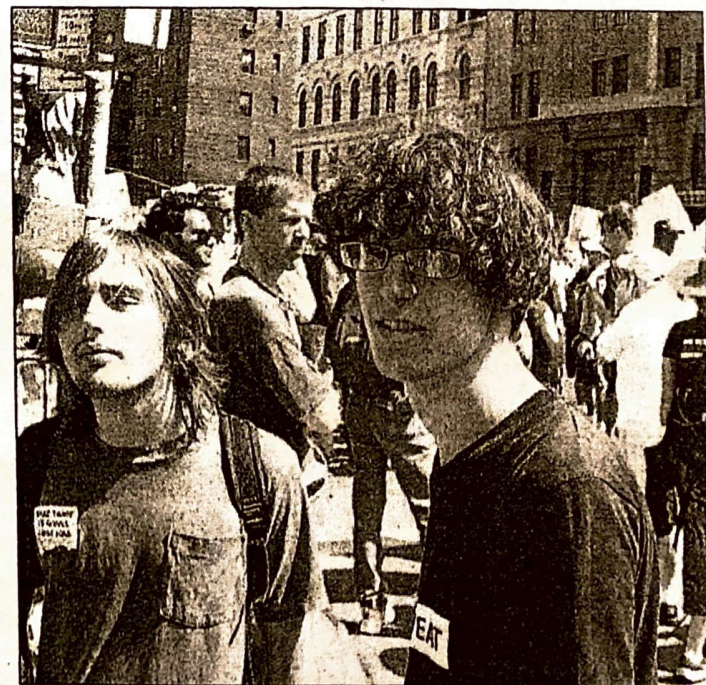
Hershman was in his element. The 19-year-old, who graduated from Ridgewood High School and currently attends Drew University, is no fan of the Bush administration, and he has much faith in political activism. Protests, he said,

not only draw attention, but they "create a community of like-minded people and empower them to work together." He cited food drives, educational teach-ins, and living wage campaigns as the products of such cooperation.

Hershman is a member of the Bergen Action Network, a grassroots youth organization that sponsored the march across the bridge. In a region not normally associated with progressive politics, BAN has become an important outlet for young activists in the county, and receives a fair amount of local media coverage.

In March of last year, five BAN members made headlines when they formed a human barricade across Route 4 during the morning rush hour to protest the Iraq war, which had begun the previous day.

Chris Whalen helped co-found BAN five years ago. He said the organization gives its members a voice, and the tools to build a political movement. "We gauge the success of the organization by what our members end up doing," he



PHOTO/BRIAN LEVINSON

Ridgewood teens Alex Ortiz, left, an incoming senior at Ridgewood High School, and Zach Hershman, a student at Drew University, joined thousands of other activists for protest marches in New York City last Sunday.

See PROTESTS, page A6

PROTESTS from A1

Bergen teens join NYC protest marches

said. "In recent years, we have traveled to protests in Washington, DC and Quebec City and been able to link up with former members who were organizing there."

Under clear blue skies, Whalen led the protesters down Lewis Street, which had been closed off by the Fort Lee police, and over to the bridge. They chanted "Drop Bush, not bombs," as they walked past local residents, news cameras, and even a large motorcycle rally that was taking place in a nearby park.

Several people, including Alan Smith, walked or rode their bicycles across the bridge. Smith, an English professor at Montclair State University, had already participated in Saturday's Critical Mass bike rally that spawned the first 250 arrests of the convention week. He said it had been an exciting experience to ride from the Lower East Side up to Central Park, and right through Times Square, with thousands of other protesters on wheels.

Travis Johnson, a 15-year-old from Englewood, marched with his mother. Johnson said that he was excited to be at the protest and attributed some of his interest in politics to high school teachers who have been fostering partisan debates in the classroom.

On the bridge, traffic slowed as drivers and passengers took note of the march. Some of them raised up their fists in solidarity. Wide-eyed children rubber-necked from the back seats. Several car and truck horns could be heard, many of them responding to protest signs that read "Honk Against the War."

Certainly not everybody supported the protesters. One woman lowered her window and suggested they jump in the river.

In what became an ongoing theme of the day, the protesters spotted an older man in a suit taking pictures who they believed was working for the police or the FBI. One protester, with a rainbow flag draped over his shoulders, stopped and shouted, "Do you want my social security number too?"

They marched a couple of blocks to catch the southbound A train at 171st street and Fort Washington Avenue. People at the sta-

"There is a strong sense of betrayal when millions of dollars are spent to protect the interests of a few elite white men rather than the interests of thousands of people in the community that surrounds them."

Zach Hershman

tion did not seem to mind the flood of protesters. "It's a good idea as long as they remain peaceful and orderly," said one woman. Another was heading to Brooklyn and planned to join the protests herself on her way back.

In the subway car, some of the protesters were soon engaged in political debate with local commuters. Hershman, finding a seat at the end of the car, took time to assess the march across the bridge. "It went really well. People were confident, energetic and happy, and that's a good environment to create. For us, protests are supposed to be a microcosm of the future that we want"

That future would include, among other things, a less hawkish foreign policy. He faulted the Bush administration for a "huge appropriation in defense spending and budgetry that have not just been going to war, but away from places like our schools."

Also, he said the president had an obligation to be a unifying figure following the controversial 2000 election, but instead took a more conservative and polarizing approach. "One of the roles of the executive, in theory, is to follow the mandate of the people, and the president has demonstrated on numerous occasions that he ignores or misrepresents significant portions of his constituency."

Sitting next to Hershman was Alex Ortiz, a rising senior at Ridgewood High School. Ortiz expressed an equal disdain for the Bush administration. He condemned the "corporate leniency" that he said has flourished over the past four years, "ranging from no-bid contracts in Iraq and elsewhere all the way to the close ties between Fox News, Rupert Murdoch, and the Bush administration."

Ortiz has engaged in activism for two years, and said that it was often difficult to find others around town with a progressive political orientation. There were, he said, only a limited number of Ridgewood High School students who were willing to organize. And when a vigil was held last year in Van Neste Square Park, most of the people who showed up were from surrounding towns.

But, at least for today, Hershman and Ortiz would not be a political minority. With the rest of the north Jersey contingent, they stepped off the subway in Greenwich Village and made their way to 7th Avenue, where they became a part of the largest demonstration that New York City has seen in at least two decades.

The march, sponsored by a group called United for Peace and Justice, brought together as many as 500,000 protesters who made their way up 7th Avenue, past Madison Square Garden – the site of the Republican National Convention – and then back down to Union Square in temperatures that reached 90 degrees.

To call it a march was something of a misnomer when they arrived. So dense was the city block that nobody could really march anywhere. "If I moved any slower, I'd be going back in time," Hershman joked. He stood in place and enjoyed the explosion of sound, color, and sweaty faces all around him.

Several people played the bongos, some danced, one man banged a steel pot with a wooden ladle, and revolutionaries of all stripes mingled in the crowd and passed out their various newspapers, newsletters, and manifestos. Children sat on the shoulders of their parents. Countless American flags and creatively-worded posters waved in the air.

Despite a large police presence, and two helicopters and a blimp that hovered ominously overhead, the protest remained peaceful and the mood upbeat. Hershman, gregarious and quick-witted, made friends quickly. He conversed with other protesters in the crowd, and helped one woman with the rhyme scheme for the next chant.

This was nothing like Miami. Hershman was there last November to demonstrate against the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas. He and others were forced to run through inner-city neighborhoods during violent clashes with police. "There is a strong sense of betrayal," he said, "when millions of dollars are spent to protect the inter-

ests of a few elite white men rather than the interests of thousands of people in the community that surrounds them."

Hershman suggested that overwhelming shows of force by police often help to provoke violent demonstrations rather than prevent them. Many protesters who engage in violence, he said, "do so because they feel intimidated and harassed by police officers. For others it may be because the way corporations are run is antithetical to the way they want to live."

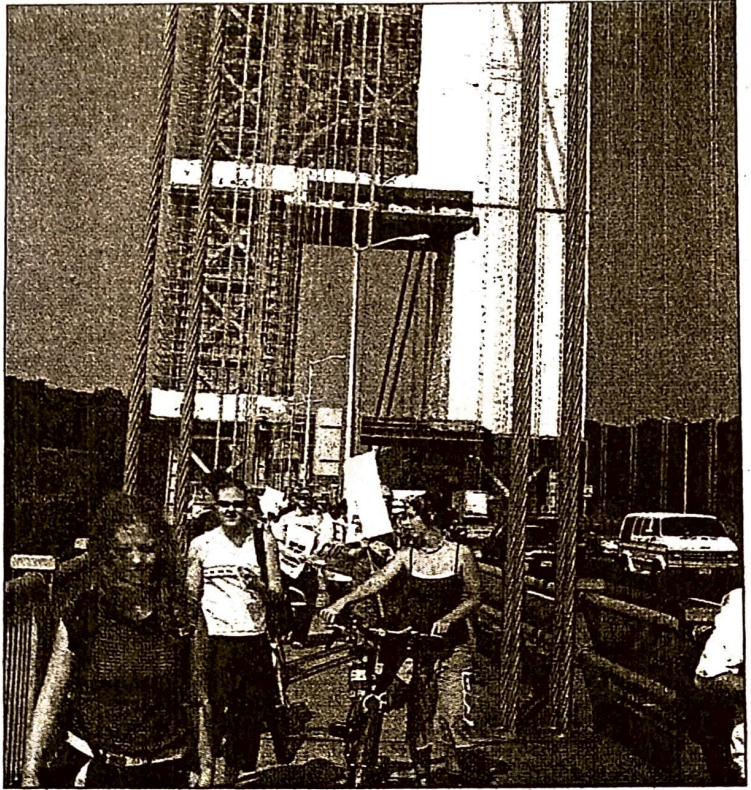
Having advanced only two blocks up 7th Avenue in an hour and a half, Hershman and the others exited the march route and proceeded to St. Mark's Church in the Bowery where a "convergence center" had been set up to provide free water and vegan food, in addition to medical and legal counsel. But the church, a longtime cultural center for the counter-culture, had run out of food.

The group decided to head for Union Square, which was the last stop of the UPJ march. Some of the lead protesters were already arriving back from Madison Square Garden. In the square itself, shabbily dressed activists lay on the grass next to scantily clad debutantes. A soap-boxing anarchist attracted a circle of listeners on the corner, while another man spoke of the historical clash between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks.

Central Park was the next destination for many of the day's protesters. March organizers, in a highly publicized legal battle, had been unable to secure permits for the Great Lawn. It was now unclear how the city would respond if and when protesters began to assemble there. For Hershman, the permit issue was irrelevant. "You shouldn't need permission from the government to protest the government"

By 4 p.m., hundreds of people were already gathering on the lawn. Many of them continued with the drums and the chants, as if back on 7th Avenue. But others threw Frisbees, or sat down to relax and read a book. The paved outer ring of the lawn was filled with park regulars who sat on benches in the shade, and also many clusters of policemen who kept largely to themselves.

One man, walking on a path adjacent to the lawn, distinguished himself from just about anybody else in the park by wearing a "Bush for President" T-shirt. "I've lived in New York for years and I'm not afraid to walk around my city," he said.



PHOTO/BRIAN LEVINSON

More than a hundred sign-wielding protesters, including adolescents, young adults, senior citizens, and whole families, set off from Fort Lee's Constitution Park last Sunday morning to march across the George Washington Bridge and into New York City to voice their discontent with the Bush administration.

A former conservative Democrat who voted twice for Bill Clinton and then Al Gore, he said he volunteered for months at Ground Zero and has six family members on active duty. He pointed to military and homeland security issues and said the "the president has wiser policies than Kerry."

"No party has a magic solution on the economy," he added. "Economic issues reflect huge generational changes that started 30 years ago." Though warning against protectionism, he defended one protectionist position taken by the president – a failed effort to impose steel tariffs – "as an attempt to increase our negotiating strength and posture with the rest of the world."

Protesters on the lawn became more vocal when television news media arrived. Some of them complained to a CNN correspondent, as she rehearsed a report and applied makeup, that she was underestimating the number of participants at the UPJ march. When the camera began to roll, protesters rushed behind her and chanted, "No to Bush, no to your wars, this whole system's rotten to

the core."

A couple of late arrivals at this made-for-TV protest were Hershman and Ortiz. They walked into the scene and stood next to each other for the balance of the news report. But the two only inserted themselves, Hershman later said, in order to block members of the Revolutionary Communist Party – identified by their T-shirts – from appearing on camera.

The communists were just one of many groups that had composed Sunday's coalition of protesters. There were also socialists, anarchists, and mainstream Democrats. Perhaps the big question that remained at the end of the day was not how many protesters disliked President Bush, but if they could all come together and agree on John Kerry to replace him.

Hershman is not a strong supporter of Senator Kerry, who he said has many of the same economic policies, and is tied to many of the same corporate interests as the president. "If I vote, it will be a last minute decision," Hershman said, "and I will probably have trouble sleeping that night."