



## OFFICE OF THE ULSTER COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY Emmanuel C. Nneji, District Attorney

### APPEAL TO SUNY NEW PALTZ PROTESTERS AND GENERAL PUBLIC

It is in the spirit of our shared interests and community that I write to appeal to everyone and those who desire to protest the actions of our government and institutions.

We must have recourse to object to governmental and institutional actions. Such recourse is enshrined in the right to peaceably assemble and air our grievances, and garner public support to effect the change we seek.

It is important to recognize that not everyone agrees with the message of every protest, but we must protect peaceable assembly even when the message is disagreeable.

I am the District Attorney of Ulster County. I am a graduate of SUNY New Paltz, Class of 1984, where I witnessed campus protests about many issues, including apartheid, hunger, wars, and other injustices. I also want you to know that I grew up during the Nigeria/Biafra Civil War, which took place between 1966 and 1970, during which fighter planes bombed my church and elementary school. I nearly died of the malnutrition disease known as *Kwashiokor*. Perhaps I survived the war and disease because of peaceful protests that ended the war sooner than it might have. I hope this gives you my perspective in this appeal as a public official who wholeheartedly supports peaceable assemblies and protests to prevent the horrors and atrocities of war.

That the cause or objective of the assembly and protest is noble or laudable does not legitimize disregarding the rules and laws. We must recognize and respect the rights of others even as we exercise ours in the interest of people near and far.

The use or threat of violence is incompatible with the pursuit of any just cause and assembly. While my office reviews current violation-level charges of trespass and disorderly conduct to determine a just and appropriate disposition, I stress that these are offenses under our laws which police officers are duty bound to enforce – even if they personally agree with the goal of the assembly and protest.

Bear in mind that your peaceable and lawful participation does not necessarily mean that there is not that small percentage who aim to sow chaos and disruption to exploit an otherwise well-intentioned constitutional exercise. Criminal activity, whether felony or misdemeanor, is inexcusable and will be prosecuted under their specific facts and circumstances. There can be no lofty or noble justification for violence or use or deployment of dangerous instruments during a peaceable assembly and protest.

Every protester has a responsibility for the safety of all participants, as well as law enforcement officers, the community, and property. We cannot allow any room for violence in any assembly or protest, on or off campus. Mutually assured respect is essential for our exercise of the freedoms and liberties guaranteed in our Constitution.



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It is the role of law enforcement to deploy appropriate resources to identify potential risky developments and act swiftly to protect equally the protesters and the rights of others. It must be emphasized that no one is above the law, and no one has constitutional rights greater than another's. No one in law enforcement chooses to be present – it is their job.

I appeal to each and every protester to do so to their hearts' content while observing the rules and laws and safety of everyone. The SUNY New Paltz community has a rich history of promoting social justice and respect for the dignity of all; we should uphold this tradition for ourselves and for other schools, cities, towns, and villages to emulate. Caring for human life and safety anywhere means everywhere.

In the spirit of graduation week, I want to congratulate all the students for their academic accomplishments and their contributions to the diverse experience of life and energy in our community. As you navigate the path and next stage of life here and elsewhere, please remember to always show and promote the best of humanity to everyone.

Emmanuel C. Nneji  
Ulster County District Attorney