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BREAKING

## Richmonders among hundreds of thousands who participated in Women's March on Washington

By VANESSA REMMERS Richmond Times-Dispatch

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Jennifer Ryan of Oakland, Calif. takes a picture of the crowds gathered at the Women's March on Washington on Sa  
SHELBY LUM / TIMES-DISPATCH

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By VANESSA REMMERS Richmond Times-Dispatch

**W**ASHINGTON — Alsuin Preis’ heart sank. Her daughter stood in a sea of pink hats and banners proclaiming the power of women and diversity, but looked disappointed and bored.

To Niamh Preis, 13, the long string of speakers that included Gloria Steinem and Michael Moore had become disembodied voices blaring words over the backs of heads in the thick Independence Avenue crowd.

Looking at her daughter’s face, all the questions Alsuin Preis had faced came flooding back.

“What was the point?” they asked when she told them she would drive north from Richmond to the nation’s capital for the Women’s March on Washington on Saturday. “What would it all accomplish?”

So the 44-year-old took a chance.

She shifted her group of nine mothers, daughters and aunts through the dense crowd until the thickness eased. They were still more than two blocks from the publicized rallying point, but it was too clogged to push forward. So they hoisted themselves onto a platform, rising above the crowd.

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When the mass of hundreds of thousands of people spread out before her, Niamh Preis’ expression changed.

It was an ocean of people stretching as far as she could see. A small chant of “We Refuse” or “Black Lives Matter” easily rippled into a roar.

A kaleidoscope of banners with myriad slogans bobbed in these waves of marchers from across the globe: “White Women against White Supremacy,” “Protect Mother Earth,” “We Go High,” “Grab Patriarchy By The Balls,” “Stop Tweeting,” “Girls just Wanna Have Fundamental Rights.”

Police officers handed their cellphones to those on the perch, asking them to take some panoramic shots of the crowd they didn’t expect to swell to such large numbers. Some of them told Alsuin Preis that Friday’s Metro stations were basically crickets, nothing compared to that of Saturday.

Among these masses — and for one of the first times since the election — Alsuin Preis felt at home.

November’s election was the first in which the Irish immigrant — and new American citizen — could cast a vote. The results stunned her. It wasn’t the America she knew and loved, that she had worked hard to become a part of. The Richmond resident did not want to believe she was alone.

She and her daughter held a banner Saturday that Alsuin Preis had made earlier in the week at Studio Two Three in Scott’s Addition. In black, weathered letters, it read, “In Awe of All Mna,” the Gaelic word for women. Another self-made banner read, “We are all immigrants.”

When actress America Ferrara declared similar words on Saturday, Alsuin Preis and her daughter high-fived.

“It was a celebration, a celebration that all of us came together. If all of us can come together, then it’s not hopeless,” said Lorna Kennedy, a 36-year-old mother of three from Richmond. The Scottish immigrant joined Preis’ group on Saturday. “I was surprised by how diverse it was and how many men there were.”

A group of students from a Charlottesville high school also were pleased with the diversity within the crowd. They knew that the inclusiveness to minorities of the march had been questioned.

But most of them felt the diverse co-chairs of the event and the crowd itself put those concerns to rest.

“We will do anything to get our voices heard,” said 18-year-old Kibiriti Majuto, who was one of the Charlottesville students and who is originally from the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Hours later, the Preises joined others who pointed their pink hats and banners toward the Washington Monument, then the White House. The speakers weren’t done and musicians had yet to perform at the rallying point, but many turned their backs to the stage and chanted, “Let’s march.”

A few speakers later, and the crowd began to move, slowly shuffling forward on its own volition.

One of the few who could temporarily silence their marching calls and impede the progress was Madonna. Many stopped to dance to “Express Yourself,” including Alsuin Preis.

“You need to stop, because you think you’re cool but you’re not,” her daughter told her.

The march’s progress was tedious as the masses bottlenecked down Constitution Avenue. But by then, Niamh Preis pointed out signs to her mother. She held their “We are all immigrants” banner high.

“Are you glad you came?” her mother asked. “Yea,” she answered.

A little later, Alsuin Preis reunited with another female friend and Irish immigrant who now lives in San Francisco and who traveled to the capital for the march. She’s now married to her wife and has two kids. They hadn’t seen each other in 10 years.

“This is my America. That other America. I don’t know it. It’s not mine,” she told her friends.

They flowed with the wave of people marching down Constitution Avenue. Eventually, law enforcement blocked off paths that waves of marchers took as they spilled onto side streets.

Slowly, the streets emptied and sirens no longer blared. As they had earlier that morning, the pink hats flooded the Metro stations. Others took refuge in Starbucks and nearby cafes, huddling next to outlets and over plates of food. Marchers plastered posters proclaiming “Women’s Rights are Human Rights,” and “Love Trumps Hate” into the crevices of restaurant windows.

The Preises hung back on L’Enfant Plaza as the masses descended into the Metro tunnel.

Niamh Preis pointed out a discarded sign on the sidewalk to her mother.

It read, “Fight Like a Girl.” It was another one she liked.

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