A solemn group stood in the shadow of the statehouse in Columbus, Ohio, forming a circle on the snow-caked sidewalk. MarShawn McCarrel, 23, a well-known Black Lives Matter activist, had taken his own life on the statehouse steps. Now his friends had come together in his memory.

As evening turned to night last week, protest organizer Rashida Davison, 25, recounted the personal toll of two years of activism: Trouble sleeping. Bouts of anxiety. Feelings of despair.

“This is really getting to us,” Davison said. “And if MarShawn’s death does not show that... I don’t know what else we need to tell or show to say that this is really going on.”

Since he died early last week, news of McCarrel’s suicide has rocked the national police protest movement, forcing a round of introspection about a reality that predates the seminal 2014 shooting of a black teenager in Ferguson, Mo.: Some of the most prominent activists and organizers are battling not only the system, but depression.

In Oakland, Calif., a prominent activist posted the phone number for a suicide prevention hotline on her Facebook page. In Cleveland, a lead organizer confessed on Facebook that he, too, had tried to take his own life. Dozens of others have shared stories of their battles with depression, anxiety and insecurity on Twitter.

“In the movement you’re just constantly engaging in black death, seeing the communal impact,” said Jonathan Butler, the University of Missouri graduate student whose hunger strike last fall led to the resignation of the school’s president. “You’re being faced with the reality that I’m more likely to be killed by the police, that I’m being discriminated against. You start to see all of the micro-aggressions.”

Like many prominent activists, Butler said he has long struggled with depression, beginning with the death of his grandfather in 2011. His involvement with the protest movement at times has worsened his mental health, he said, not only because of the emotional strain of a single-minded focus on racism, but also because of more
mundane stresses, such as media scrutiny and infighting among allies.

“So many people glamorize the visibility that comes with being in these spotlights,” Butler said. “And they’re not seeing the pressures.”

‘It’s pretty obvious that he impacted so many people’

Friends were not sure about the roots of McCarrel’s depression; family members declined to comment.

The young activist first rose to prominence in Columbus through the city’s poetry scene, particularly Mosaic, a poetry program for teenagers.

“He was always at all of the open mics, and it was clear immediately that he was a significantly better writer than most of his peers,” said Hanif Abdurraqib, a writer who met McCarrel in 2010 and immediately noticed his confidence and sense of humor.

“So often we get these pictures of activists on the front lines of movements as deeply serious people,” Abdurraqib said. McCarrel, by contrast, was “wildly funny.”

About five years ago, friends said McCarrel’s artwork began to overlap with his activism, and he founded Pursuing Our Dreams, a group that organized monthly “feed the streets” events to provide homemade lunches to the homeless.

He was also one of several organizers who worked to plan a large, multi-organization “Freedom Summer” rally in 2014 — plans that were later scrapped after Michael Brown was shot and killed by a white police officer in Ferguson, Mo.

After Ferguson, McCarrel began working with the Ohio Student Association, one of the largest and most active protest groups in the Black Lives Matter movement. He helped lead rallies to support the families of John Crawford and Tamir Rice, a black man and a black boy shot and killed in separate incidents by Ohio police in 2014. McCarrel was also one of five organizers arrested during a protest in Tennessee.

Zahra Farah, a 20-year-old activist who studies sociology at Columbus State Community College, recalls a conversation she had with McCarrel at a protest last spring. She’d been demonstrating since 2014, and felt
My demons won today': Ohio activist's suicide spotlights depression among Black Lives Matter leaders – The Washington Post

frustrated, dejected and angry about what she perceived as a lack of progress.

“He was like, ‘You're here right now, and you're obviously using your efforts to do something better,’” Farah recalled McCarrel saying. “It's pretty obvious that he impacted so many people, not just me.”

Just one week before his death, McCarrel attended the NAACP Image Awards in California, where he was recognized for his activism. His mother proudly posted an image of the two on the red carpet on her Facebook page.

“He's been part of the movement for a very long time,” said Dante Barry, executive director of Million Hoodies Movement for Justice, a New York-based activist group. Barry knew McCarrel well and said he hoped his friend’s death spurs an honest conversation among top activists about the culture of the protest movement.

“Organizing saves people's lives,” Barry said. “But we also don’t do a good job of saving the lives of the people who are organizing.”

‘We’re human’

Studies have found that black Americans are more susceptible to depression and anxiety — a disparity that health experts believe stems from social stigma and a lack of access to mental health resources in black communities, as well as a reluctance to take advantage of those resources when they are available.

“It's really tough in the black community because we're going uphill trying to fight all of these negative stereotypes about us, and the last thing a lot of black people want to do is give people one more reason to look down on us,” said Monnica Williams, director of the Center for Mental Health Disparities at the University of Louisville. “I think a lot of African Americans are walking around depressed, coping from day to day, and not really living.”

A study by the federal Office of Minority Health found that African Americans are 20 percent more likely to experience serious mental health problems than the general population. And for an activist, Williams said, depression can be especially dangerous. Much of the conversation about race and justice occurs online, where harsh and threatening messages are abundant.

One of McCarrel’s last Facebook posts was a screenshot of a threatening email he had received: “Were (sic) gonna
keep making your life hell until you keep your NIGGER mouth closed,” the email said.

A few hours before he fatally shot himself, McCarrel posted a final message on Facebook: “My demons won today. I’m sorry.”

“There are so many folks in this movement that have serious mental health issues,” said Alexis Templeton, who is among the most prominent organizers in St. Louis. “There are so many folks who are on the brink of killing themselves.”

When she first joined the protests in 2014, Templeton was one of those people. A year earlier, she had been a passenger in a deadly car crash that killed her father, uncle and partner. Her guilt about surviving was often hard to bear, she said, and there were many days when she sat in her room with a loaded gun to her head.

Aug. 13, 2014, was one of those days. But as she pondered pulling the trigger, Templeton couldn’t shake the images of protest pouring out of Ferguson. One of her childhood friends was among the first to tweet photos from the scene of Michael Brown’s death. She had watched intensely, glued to her phone, as demonstrators were tear gassed.

Templeton decided she might as well go out and see things for herself before pulling the trigger.

“I went outside and I never came back in,” Templeton said. “Mike Brown saved my life.”

In Ferguson, Templeton found community and belonging, spending night after night with a bullhorn in her hand, leaping almost out of her shoes as she led the protest chants: “Indict, convict, send that killer cop to jail. The whole damn system is guilty as hell!”

Ultimately, she fell in love and married a fellow activist. Now she encourages others to follow her lead, attending therapy if they have access to it and speaking publicly about their personal struggles.

“It’s most important to remember that we’re human, even when the spotlight tries to make us superhuman,” Templeton said. “It’s okay to confront those demons, and to confront them publicly. And don’t feel like you have to hide from them.”

Stankiewicz, a freelance writer, reported from Columbus, Ohio.
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