

In LA, activists 'summon spiritual energy' to seek justice for Keenan Anderson

by [Alejandra Molina](#)

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Crowds recite an affirmation by Assata Shakur on January 14 at a vigil in honor of Keenan Anderson. (RNS photo by Alejandra Molina)

Amid pouring rain, interfaith and spiritual leaders offered prayers in African, Christian, Muslim, and Indigenous traditions during a candlelight vigil on January 14 to honor Keenan Anderson—a teacher and father and the cousin of Black Lives Matter co-founder Patrisse Cullors—who died after Los Angeles police repeatedly tased him following a traffic crash.

The vigil was not a protest but a “spiritual gathering,” said Melina Abdullah, co-founder of the Los Angeles chapter of Black Lives Matter. Abdullah said they will be protesting in the coming days against police response to traffic, mental health, and school-related incidents. But, Saturday’s convening was meant to “give love and our spiritual energy to the family.”

“We have to summon spiritual energy,” Abdullah said. “It’s spirit that will get as much justice as we can in Keenan’s name.”

In unison, attendees chanted “Asé” as they recited Anderson’s name and the names of others who were killed by police. It was part of an African libation ritual led by activist Dominique DePrima “to call in spirit.” A Yoruba term, Asé is [used](#) by practitioners of Ifa, a faith and divination system originating from West Africa.

Several dozens attended the gathering, lighting candles and placing flowers on the corner of Venice and Lincoln boulevards, the site of the January 3 encounter, in which body-camera footage shows an officer’s elbow pushed into Anderson’s neck. The same officer’s forearm also pressed against his chest.

“They’re trying to George Floyd me,” Anderson said as an officer threatened to use a stun gun, which was repeatedly deployed seconds later as Anderson was face down on the pavement and begged for help, [according to the Associated Press](#). Anderson went into cardiac arrest hours later.

LAPD Chief Michel Moore said Anderson was the suspect in a hit-and-run traffic collision and initially complied with officers’ orders as they investigated whether he was under the influence of drugs or alcohol. He later fled, and officers chased him into the middle of the street, according to Moore.

Anderson, who taught high school English in Washington, DC, was visiting family in LA during winter break.

“We don’t have to live like this,” Cullors said on Saturday, noting that this year will mark the 10th anniversary of Black Lives Matter.

“Ten years later, I stand in front of you on Venice and Lincoln, where my cousin begged for his life . . . No human being deserves to fear for their life in the last hours of their life,” she said.

James Thomas with Clergy for Black Lives prayed for God to remove Moore from his position and for Anderson’s family “to understand that we are with them, not just as we pray, but as we fight for justice in his name.”

“Why does this continue to happen to our people?” asked Thomas. “Why do we continue to have to endure white supremacy and evil in those who are supposed to serve and protect us?”

Cullors and other organizers have described Black Lives Matter as a spiritual movement. Faith leaders from across religious traditions, as well as clergy and houses of worship, have rallied in support of Black Lives Matter against police brutality.

Uplifting the names of victims goes beyond creating hashtags, Cullors has said.

“It is literally almost resurrecting a spirit so they can work through us to get the work that we need to get done,” she said during a [2020 conversation](#) about the spirituality of Black Lives Matter.

By highlighting their names, Cullors said she feels “personally connected and responsible and accountable to them, both from a deeply political place but also from a deeply spiritual place.” —Religion News Service

*The Associated Press contributed to this report.*