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Black business owner reflects on protests while repairing damage to store

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Vegan Fine Foods owner Steven Smith received a phone call late Sunday night from a neighboring business owner who told him his grocery store and café was being vandalized.

"I just threw on the nearest set of clothes and rushed over," he told the *Business Journal*.

Following a protest that afternoon at Huizenga Plaza on Las Olas Boulevard in Fort Lauderdale, unrest spilled over to Himmarshee Street by Smith's store.

The protest was one of many across the nation, including in Miami, West Palm Beach, and Coral Gables, that took place over that weekend in response to the death of George Floyd. The unarmed black man died after a white Minneapolis police officer knelt on his neck for nearly nine minutes despite Floyd's pleas that he could not breathe.

NBC News reported Floyd's death sparked more than 100 protests, rallies and vigils, with hundreds of people arrested as protesters clashed with police.

On Sunday, while Smith drove to his business to assess the damage, images of looting in other cities cycled through his mind. Smith said he couldn't help but



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Owner Steven Smith poses in front of Vegan Fine Foods in Fort Lauderdale prior to the region's protests.

imagine a worst case scenario where all of his store's merchandise would be gone. But he hoped for the best.

When he arrived, the crowds had dissipated and he assessed nothing had been stolen, he said. But windows at the front and side of the store were broken. Security camera footage showed that the café's outdoor furniture was used to break the windows and no one entered the store, he said.

The aftermath

Smith said he began to clear up the mess and debris Monday morning. He laid paper over the windows until they could be repaired, in case a second night of protests led to more damage, he added.

Part of him wanted to stay that evening and protect his store, but he recalled stories of business owners hurt in other cities while trying to stand between their establishments and vandals, he said. In Louisville, a black business owner was shot and killed in a scuffle that included protesters and police officers earlier Monday morning.

"I didn't feel safe," Smith said. "My life, health and safety are more important than any material things in the store."

Throughout Monday, Smith attempted to get an estimate on the cost to repair the windows, but the repair company couldn't provide an immediate quote.

"It wasn't easy getting somebody out here to look at it, because the company said they've been so busy looking at other businesses in Miami and Fort Lauderdale which also suffered damage," he said.

He was just one or two weeks away from reopening his store, after closing in mid-May due to Covid-19, Smith said. But the recent damage won't deter his plans to reopen no later than June 15.

A time to reflect

Smith said that as a black man he completely understands the protesters who seek justice for victims of police brutality. He was "shook" watching the video of

the Minneapolis police officer holding his knee to Floyd's neck, which led to his death, he added.

"I understand the protests, and I am sympathetic to them," Smith said. "I am sympathetic, but I draw the line at destruction of businesses."

Smith added that he began to think real change in how black Americans are treated wouldn't happen in his lifetime.

But he said the outrage and response to Floyd's death, including the hundreds of protests, has led him to believe that a greater good could still come from the demonstrations.

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