In the weeks following George Floyd’s murder thousands of people took to the streets to protest systemic racism and stand in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. One New Jersey retired teacher was considering how he could participate. Ed Kelly, a West Long Branch resident with a 36-year teaching career at Shore Regional High School, wanted to join with the protesters. But his health issues made it difficult for him to march in the streets. After a few days of pondering options, he found his own way to bring awareness to systemic racism. Every morning, without fail, from about 8:30 to 9:30 am, he can be found leaning against a stool on the shoulder of Highway 36 in West Long Branch holding a sign that reads “Black Lives Matter”.

I met up with Ed Kelly on the 71st day of his protest. He told me he is committed to standing on the highway every morning until Donald Trump is no longer President. “You need to be persistent in your protest,” he notes. He is hoping that his protest will end on Inauguration Day on January 20, 2021. But if Trump wins the election in November he is dedicated to “being here much longer.”

Ever the teacher, Ed understands that part of his job on Highway 36 is to continue to educate people. In fact, on the back of Ed’s sign he has written out what he calls “my lesson plan”. When people stop to talk with him, he uses the opportunity to deliver them a lesson on institutional racism. Using the iceberg metaphor as a teaching tool, he notes that while people may see and recognize overt forms of racism such as the KKK, the reality is that much of racial inequality is embedded in our housing, education, health, policing, employment and other institutions. Ed notes that “it is important for us to understand all of this [under the tip of the iceberg].” He talks about the impact of gerrymandered districts and red-lining policies in his own town and throughout the country. He educates passers-by about environmental racism, lack of health care and transportation barriers, challenging people to understand how structural factors impact equity. And he discusses the role of micro-aggressions, like racist jokes, in perpetuating racism. And he also reminds those who come by to vote in November. Ed says his protest about the highway “it is so important. We can’t just sit around; we have to do something.”

He has received mostly positive reactions from drivers—with lots of people honking horns and waving in support. Several people have stopped to take pictures of him and talk with him. One family brought their young daughter to meet him and learn from his “lesson plan.” Others have even brought him food. However, not everyone’s response has been positive. He has had people drive off the road a bit into the shoulder as if to run him over. He recalls one driver “he was off the road, in the shoulder, coming right at me. I was thinking, I am not moving. Is this guy committed to killing me? And he wasn’t.” Ed notes that at the last minute the driver swerved away from him off the shoulder and back onto the highway.

Ed comes from a family of educators—his mother was a teacher starting her career in 1928 and his son is currently a kindergarten teacher in the neighboring town of Long Branch. And at 74-years old, Ed continues to teach. But this time he is not teaching in a classroom but instead on a busy highway. He remarks: “I am glad that I am here and I am glad that I can do something.”