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Chicago Marches to Free the Jena 6

Midwest Committee for the Jena 6 Spread the News in Chicago

By Shamontiel

On September 9, 2007 (Sunday), protestors traveled to the NBC 5 building (Chicago) at 11:30 am for a rally supporting the freeing of the Jena 6. Twenty-year-old Tenisha Wilkerson of Chicago, IL is the organizer of this event and the founder of Midwest Committee for the Jena 6. Approximately seventy people of diverse races came from numerous locations (Cleveland, New Orleans, Detroit, Illinois suburbs, and Chicago) came together to walk from the NBC 5 building to the Daley Center chanting "Free Jena 6" and "No Justice No Peace" with signs that read just those lines. A representative from the YWCA passed out buttons with the word "racism" crossed out and "Ask me what I did today to eliminate racism?"

What this group actually did do to eliminate racism was to stand up for a group of six African-American students who are in jail for five of the six fighting a White student, who'd jumped one African American student at a party. The tension initially rose in Jena, Louisiana in September of 2006 when a Black student asked school administrators if it was okay for Black students to sit under an alleged Whites only tree at LaSalle High School. The administrators said that Black students could sit wherever they wanted, but the next day, the Black students were greeted with three nooses in the school's colors. The White students, who were responsible for the noose hanging, were initially going to be expelled by the principal, but the school superintendent outranked the principal's decision to a three-day suspension. On November 30, 2006, an unknown person/group set fire to the central wing of the school while 17-year-old Robert Bailey Jr. was punched and beaten by beer bottles after trying to enter a mostly White party even though he was invited to attend by a White associate of his. As a result, one White student was charged with assault but received only probation. A few days following these incidents, a White young man held three Black students at gun point in Gotta Go convenience store, had the gun wrestled away from him, and Bailey Jr. reported this attack to the police who charged Bailey Jr. with theft of a firearm. The gun owner was charged with nothing after being released on a \$5,000 bond.

Justin Barker, a White student who was a friend of the boys who hung the nooses and one of the White guys who attacked Bailey Jr., taunted Bailey Jr. at lunch a few days later by calling him the n-word and bragging about how he beat Bailey Jr. up previously. Soon after, Bailey Jr. and a couple other students got into a fight with Barker. Though it was reported Barker was kicked and stomped on the ground, after a short medical treatment, he was only treated for a swollen face and a cut. Later that day, Barker attended the class ring ceremony. After that fight, six black students (one unidentified) were originally charged with attempted second-degree murder and conspiracy, and face anywhere from 22 to 100 years of prison time. Carwin Jones and Theo Shaw are being charged with aggravated second-degree battery and conspiracy. Two other students, Bailey Jr. and Bryant Purvis, still await trial for attempted murder. Mychal Bell, a 16-year-old, sophomore football star, was convicted (as an adult and with a bail of \$90,000) of aggravated battery, conspiracy to commit aggravated battery, and could face up to 22 years in prison. Bell was represented by a public defender, who believed race was not an issue in this case; called no witnesses; and did not challenge the all-White jury because he didn't want to "open the door for further accusations," and the prosecutor wanted to charge Bell with aggravated battery and claimed Bell's tennis shoes were a dangerous weapon.

Wilkerson created a Facebook group for freeing the Jena 6, which attracted over 30,000 students. She has since reached out to MySpace users, churches, radio stations, television news stations, the NAACP, and other activists. "With us marching in Chicago, it's showing that this is a nationwide problem. The first person to break the story is not even in the US," Wilkerson says.

Joel of "International Socialist Review" says "Unfortunately it's typical of a lot of this stuff around judicial racism in a lot of these small towns. It's pretty much ignored by the major media outlets until there's some public pressure and campaigning around it. It's kind of ironic that the one news outlet that did a major story was a British broadcasting company. They devoted a whole half hour program to it several months ago, and most media outlets in this country haven't done that yet."

"The more people involved, the more Jena, Louisiana will be pressured. No charges would've been lessened or dropped without this kind of attention," Wilkerson states.

Latoya Johnson of TOI Entertainment said when she first found out about the Jena 6 issue, "My heart was broken. Why is segregation still going on? African Americans are naïve to believe we're free from segregation when we're not. These students were only trying to protect themselves. Why are [the Jena 6] being charged and [Barker] is not? The school handbook says a fight is three days suspension. I think [the Jena 6] should get three days too. Two wrongs don't make a right, and [the Jena 6] shouldn't have jumped on [Barker], but it's not worth prison time. These are kids! The school should've taken the nooses as racist, and none of this would've happened."

"Noose hanging is a hate crime. You go to jail for hate crimes, not just a three-day suspension," Wilkerson counters. "The guy with the gun should've went to jail. The [Jena 6] was charged for attempted murder because of [Barker's] family. Justin would've went on with his life. I blame the parents. Kids aren't born into racism. The parents teach them that. It's an epidemic.

Takeaways

- A group of six African-American students are in jail for five of the six fighting a White student.
- "African Americans are naïve to believe we're free from segregation when we're not," says Latoya.
- "No charges would've been lessened or dropped without this kind of attention," says Tenisha.

Justin was at the ring ceremony, so he couldn't have been beat up that badly. The Jena 6 was wrong for fighting him, but they should just get probation. I prefer they get the three-day suspension too. Go by the handbook."

While standing outside of the NBC 5 building, a security guard at the front desk called the police, but the police were met with a permit from the YWCA for the Chicago march today. A front desk attendant in the NBC 5 building was hesitant to let a protestor use the bathroom downstairs until she lied and said she was not with the party outside. Then that front desk attendant immediately told her where the bathrooms were.

Joining Joel of the "International Socialist Review" magazine were journalists Aaron from the "Public Eye" newspaper in Champagne, IL, Kathy Chaney of the "Chicago Defender," and news teams from the "Chicago Tribune" and ABC news. Both the Tribune and ABC left a few minutes after the protestors landed in front of the Daley Center to start explaining the Jena 6 issues.

Journalist Chuck Berman from the "Chicago Tribune" inquired as to why the march was being held today instead of during the workweek to draw more attention. But with so many onlookers sitting at tables of various restaurants, riding bikes, stopped on the Magnificent Mile traffic, sightseeing, and shoppers peeking their heads out to see where the chants were coming from and furiously reading the handouts given to them as the group traveled, Wilkerson's goal of getting the word out worked.

"I wish I'd have known about this earlier. I'd have marched too. I'm going to tell other people about it too. [Jena, Louisiana] needs to leave the confederacy behind," said Susanne, an onlooker who happened to be passing by Border's bookstore on State Street when she saw the crowd.

For those who will not be able to attend the march on September 20th in Jena, Louisiana, when Bell will be given a final sentence, there will be a follow-up march in Chicago on September 20th as well. Johnson will start the march from 4 pm in front of the Daley Center in the direction of the NBC 5 building. Jena 6 t-shirts are being sold on <http://www.colorofchange.org/jena/shirts/>, and all proceeds for the \$10 shirts will be donated to the Jena 6 defense fund. Activists can also send donations to the NAACP.com Website and The Jena 6 Defense Committee, PO Box 2798, Jena, LA 71342. E-mail jena6defense@gmail.com for follow-up details. Beware of fake Websites who claim to donate to the Jena 6, but they are not distributing the money to the Jena 6's parents.

For more details, please contact/visit:

Jena 6: Six Black Men Face Up to 100 Years Prison Time

http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/338132/jena_6_six_black_men_face_up_to_100.html

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More resources

http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/338132/jena_6_six_black_men_face_up_to_100.html

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