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Jena 6 Rally (Part 2: The Experience)

Part 2 of 3

By Shamontiel

The bus service for the Midwest Committee for the Jena 6 were forced to cancel their bus trip to Jena, Louisiana. The bus company said that it was too dangerous to go there, and they did not want to endanger their workers. Considering that was my original route that I wanted to travel with, I searched endlessly through Websites to find another bus that was traveling through Chicago, and I lucked up on a forum on [Michael Baisden's Website](#). A woman named Benita Arnold was organizing a bus route through the Midwest from Indiana to Illinois to Missouri and then to Jena, Louisiana.

Marie Williams, a veteran of activism for civil rights from the Million Women's March and the Million More March, and the bus co-owner of Spirit Tours, Inc., said, "When Benita Arnolds contacted us about this event, it was a go. This Jena 6 case is another shining example of how racism is still alive." When asked if she felt her bus service would be in danger when coming to Jena, Louisiana, she replied, "I trust a higher God. I don't consider myself to be in danger when you take the Lord along with you. I just felt that we could make a contribution by providing transportation for all those people who did want to go down to Jena."

I was obviously one of those people who wanted to go down, and after reserving my seat with this group, I stood outside of Jewel Osco on 87th and the Dan Ryan on September 19th (Wednesday) ready to protest. I'm used to being the most passionate person out of a group. I'm usually the one who's complaining about injustice and trying to find ways to change things, but this group of 50+ people of elementary-school age to people in their fifties and sixties gave me a run for my money. One video about a Communist White man's take on racism took our group on an hour-long conversation about how we felt about the Jena 6 case, racism, education, African Americans, White Americans, sexism, presidency, communism, and so forth. Various documentaries were recorded while sitting on the bus, reports were written, email addresses exchanged, photos were taken, and the Friends of Northwest Indiana group riding the Spirit Tours, Inc. bus were antsy to get to Jena, Louisiana. Even when Williams informed the riders that we were advised to have the women and children sit on the back of the bus and the men in the front because there were rumors of the KKK making an appearance, our group still didn't bat an eye. We were ready for anything, and we didn't move. We were unnerved by Jena, Louisiana because this group did something that the residents there cannot seem to do. When debating about issues on the bus that launched from the Communist video, we agreed to disagree peacefully and got along the entire time. There were no shouting matches to end lives with the stroke of a pen for disagreeing. There were no hate crimes because some of us didn't see eye to eye on various subjects. We listened intently to each other's thoughts, thanked the others for expressing their views, and got on and off the bus together knowing full well we were different people with different views and backgrounds. Instead of picking on our differences, we embraced them.

The Friends of Northwest Indiana group peered around in a backwoods town around 5:00 am on September 20th to see run down homes with trailer parks and White people standing outside of their trucks taking photos of the buses. Police officers were everywhere guiding traffic. While some stores like auto parts places were open at a suspect hour, the more common companies (such as fast food restaurants and gas stations) were closed for business. Jena, Louisiana may have closed their services to make sure that Blacks did not spend money there, but what the townspeople did not realize was that protestors of all ethnicities had no intentions whatsoever to spend a dime there. People who stayed overnight were in hotels in surrounding locations, but not Jena, Louisiana. Black folks in Jena, Louisiana probably don't want to be there, so trust us when we say we had no intentions of trying to lay up where we were not wanted. However, the protestors knew that they were needed, and this is why thousands of people arrived in support of the Jena 6.

Climbing off the bus, the first group of protestors with the Rainbow Coalition was already at a park about a mile away. The second group of protestors traveled half that mile and immediately linked arms to resemble Civil Rights marchers before they marched off from the park to the courthouse. This massive group of 15,000 to 20,000 people consisted of senior citizens, Black Greek fraternities, Black Greek sororities, other college students, children, parents, writers, artists, deejays, poets, blue collar workers, white collar workers, numerous races, diverse cultures, and different hometowns. Protestors marched alongside each other who had never met in their entire life, but they linked arms and shouted their opinions about the Jena 6 being freed as they walked by photographers and videographers, surprisingly calm police officers, and Black Jena 6 townspeople. Singing to the tune of Kanye West's "Can't Tell Me Nothing," chanters crooned "Ohhh-ohhh-ohhh/Wait 'til I get my freedom right," some groups sang gospel music, some chanted powerfully with call and response lines like "What do we want?" "JUSTICE!" "When do we want it?" "NOW!" Others walked quietly on, shaking their heads at the Keep Out signs of surrounding communities that brainwashed themselves into thinking that protestors had any remote interest in visiting their rundown homes. No thanks!

When asking Arnolds what she'd like to happen to the Jena 6, she stated, "I don't condone violence. I understand that with [Justin Barker] being the ring leader, I understand [the Jena 6's] reasoning for beating him up, but they are children. They are not adults. I think the charges should be dropped. The punishment has been done."

In answer to my query about whether anti-protestors perceive that protestors are condoning violence by supporting the Jena 6, Richard of Soul 106 FM (Chicago) replies, "It's disturbing to think that a guy could get 22 years in prison for assault with a deadly weapon, which was a gym shoe. It just goes to show you how just when we think that we have gotten over this racial hump, you know, it's still there. That's why we're in Jena 6, to show that we won't stand for it. If there's going to be punishment, there should be punishment for all parties involved. I applaud the principal for wanting to expel [the noose hangers], but it was the Superintendent of the school who said 'no, it was a harmless prank.' So I think that instead of us not only taking a stand for the Jena 6, I think we also need to take a look at the school administration because the school administration has failed not only the African American students but the White students as well."

Responding to the accusation from anti-protestors that the noose hangers should not be punished for a nonphysical crime, Richard says, "Just say out of retaliation, the Black students were to put a white sheet on the noose to make it seem like a klansman was hanging from it. Can you imagine how much more danger or how much more of an uproar that would've brought? It's not about Black and White. What's right is right and what's wrong is wrong. It might not seem offensive to them, but if you go back and look at our history of our ancestors being hanged and slaughtered for freedom and justice, [the noose hanging] is still unjust."

Larry Smith, a pastor from Indianapolis' New Horizons Church, quotes Dr. King by saying, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. I couldn't simply sit back and let these events unfold as long as I had my breath in my body. I had to come down here," in answer to why he came down. Also an activist against the Rodney King beating and a participant in the Million Man March, he is a veteran by marching for equal rights. When asked whether Barker had the right to be the leader in jumping Bailey Jr., Smith states, "[Bailey Jr.] has a right to go wherever he wants to go free from being beaten. [Barker] could've always called authorities to ask him to be removed [from the party]. Resorting to violence was absolutely unnecessary. A lot of people are riled up because there seems to be two different systems of justice based upon race."

At the park where NAACP members met, Reverend Nelson Rivers was queried about what he wants the turnout of the Jena 6 to be. He replied, "[The NAACP] hopes that they get back in school soon. They're missing a lot of what they need from our society. It's hard for Black, educated men to make it in America. It's almost impossible for an uneducated Black man to make it in America."

Speaking of education, when asking Joann Michel of [Revolution newspaper](#), how she felt the school should've handled the noose hanging that became the domino effect of all instances with the Jena 6, Michel states, "If they really wanted to resolve the issue, they should've sat everyone down and had a history lesson. Teach the real true history of [lynching] and have an open discussion with the students about what does this represent and why is it wrong to have hung the nooses. They should be educating people about that." I asked Michel did she see the YouTube interview with the librarian of the Jena High School, who said she didn't know what the nooses were for, Michel's eyes widened and she said, "Is she reading the books in the library? Hei-lo!"

With librarians (who I'm not gullible enough to believe is this ignorant of noose hanging) denying she knew what it was for, a Superintendent dismissing a hate crime as a prank, and White Jena residents who think that Black residents were simply going to have amnesia after the noose hanging incident with minimal punishment to those involved, it is almost automatic that such antics would be blown off. Even when leaving Jena, Louisiana and two KKK members who repeatedly rode past protestors ([Jeremiah Munsen, 18, and a 16-year-old passenger](#)) were arrested for having nooses on the back of their pick-up truck, I didn't bat an eye. I expected to see the KKK, but I did not. I expected to run into anti-protestors who would stand by Barker's side no matter how wrong he was. I did not. I expected to see confederate flags, and on a beautiful home on the way from Jena, LA to Alexandria, LA, I did. But what I did not expect was for people who are so set in their opinions of the Jena 6 being imprisoned to flee the town and tie up their homes. When someone honestly feels that they are right about a situation, they'd plant themselves right in front of everyone and take a stand, not run off until the Black folks leave. When Jena residents are ready to act like grown-ups and have a civilized conversation with those not completely carbon copies of themselves, that would no doubt help the situation. Instead, townspeople once again resort to ridiculous and hateful "pranks" such as nooses. Are these people not taught to handle a situation any other way than through violence?

For more information on the Jena 6 case, please visit [Jena 6 Case: Six Black Men Face Up to 100 Years Prison Time](#).

For an in-depth view of how the Jena 6 rally appeared, please visit [Jena 6 Rally \(Part 1: The Scene\)](#).

More resources

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