

## **Jena 6**

### **James H. Buford's Column**

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If anything can be said about the state of racial relations in 2007, it can be said that we have entered into a season of discontent. Rodney King said it best when he asked, "Can't we all just get along?" From the Don Imus tirade of disrespect against African American women to the Jena Six saga which caused six black teens to be charged with attempted murder for participating in a high school fight, anyone can see that racism is alive and threatening in the United States. In addition to these well-publicized events, there have been several other "noose-hanging" incidents and hate crimes committed in the name of racism. The use of nooses as a means of racial insults digs deep into the painful past of blacks being lynched by slave owners and hate-filled Ku Klux Klan members. Truly, these symbols have no place in today's American society.

Previously, many have said that we are now living in the modern post-Civil Rights Era, or even that civil rights is no longer an issue for African Americans. Without stating the obvious, it is truly time for African Americans to create a plan of action to address racial discrimination in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As you can now see, racism is so deeply entrenched in America's culture that blacks must remain vigilant in order to safeguard even the civil rights gains we achieved in the 1960s.

The Jena Six have brought much-needed attention to the racial disparities that exist in the criminal justice system. As you all may know, this scandal began with three white students hanging nooses on the 'white' tree on the campus of Jena High School in protest of black students sitting by 'their' tree. This situation became even more heated when the three negligent white students were only suspended from school for their actions and not charged with a hate crime due to the fact that they were juveniles. Following this incident, other racially charged fights occurred culminating in an attack on a white student by six black students. In this case, however, the African American students were expelled from school and charged with attempted murder as adults. This obvious discrimination caused the Jena Six cause to be taken up by nationally recognized civil rights activists such as Tom Joyner, Michael Baisden, Rev. Jesse Jackson, Martin Luther King III, and

Rev. Al Sharpton. On the day that Mychal Bell, the oldest of the Jena Six, was scheduled to be arraigned nearly 25,000 people from around the country came to Louisiana to show support for him and protest Jena's racist criminal charges. This battle is far from over with the U.S. House of Representatives Judiciary Committee currently reviewing the case.

Even on the nation's college campuses, blatant racism is rearing its ugly head as swastikas, nooses and racial epithets are showing up at noted institutions such as Columbia University, Gallaudet University and Washington University in St. Louis. At Columbia, someone placed a noose on an African American professor's door. An African American student from Gallaudet University, a secondary school for the deaf, was held against his will by six white students and marked with KKK and swastikas symbols. Even in St. Louis, someone wrote the 'N' word on the car of a black female student.

Racism was once regarded as a specter of the past or as something that was regulated to a subculture. However, once again we see that it is now being brought to the forefront by new events. It is now up to a new generation of African Americans to pick up the torch left behind by late civil rights leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks and Justice Thurgood Marshall to hold our leaders and government accountable to the laws of this land.