



# Opinion

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## The march against bigotry in Mississippi

CONTRIBUTED STORY FOR THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

• Probes sought in the deaths of honor student Raynard Johnson and Mississippi jail inmates

This past weekend, the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition (RPC) returned to Mississippi to host a series of rallies and marches in an attempt to secure answers surrounding the mysterious deaths of a 17-year-old national merit scholar and more than 40 Mississippi jail inmates.

The first march began on July 8, 2000 at the West Marian High School in Foxworth, where Raynard Johnson was an honor student and athlete. From the school, in the scorching 90 plus-degree weather, Rev. Jesse L. Jackson led the marchers, including the mothers of Raynard and Emmett Till, to the Johnson's home in Kikomo, where Raynard's body was found hanging from a tree. Once there, they rallied for justice and racial harmony before traveling west to Gulfport for a 5 p.m. rally at the St. James Baptist Church at 604 25 St.

The second march began at 2 p.m. on Sunday July 9, 2000 at Duckworth Park in Columbia and concludes at the Marion County Court House. There, Rev. Jackson convened a 5 p.m. rally.

"Mississippi must come alive," Rev. Jackson said. "Mississippi, let's rally to stop the killings. Mississippi should not be left at a lower expectation than any other state."

The Facts:

When Jerry Johnson approached the driveway of his home on June 16<sup>th</sup>, about 9:30 p.m., he found the body of Raynard hanging from a small pecan tree. Raynard's body was not suspended. His feet were on the ground; his knees were slightly bent and a belt was tied around his neck. The death was initially ruled a suicide, but due to the suspicious circumstances surrounding the death, authorities have recently launched a criminal investigation. The Rev. Jackson, family members and other concerned citizens believe Johnson was lynched, because he had established a close friendship with white females. The RPC is offering a \$10,000 reward for information that leads to an arrest and conviction.

While this investigation continues, RPC officials will also urge investigators to probe the recent mysterious deaths of more than 40 Mississippi inmates, who died while in police custody. Most of these deaths have been ruled suicides, but Rev. Jackson and human rights groups believe bigotry could have led to their deaths.

"Columbia is where Walter Payton's (the late Hall of Fame running back for the Chicago Bears) father was killed," Rev. Jackson said. "He turned himself in under his own power, because they said he was drinking. But he left the jail in a body bag."

Rev. Jackson said he invited Mamie Mobley, the mother of the late Emmett Till, to the events, because her participation with Mrs. Johnson, shows "solidarity" in the struggle for justice.

During the summer of 1955, Emmett, a 14-year-old Chicago native, was savagely beaten and thrown in the muddy Mississippi River for allegedly whistling at a white woman. Emmett's highly publicized death is one of the events that pushed the civil rights movement into high gear.

RPC officials hope Raynard's death will force the nation to address the rise in hate crimes and racial intolerance.

"All races need to come together to work towards a new Mississippi, a Mississippi that practices equal protection under the law, a Mississippi that practices due process and encourage economic and social justice," Rev. Jackson said. "Let's fight back together. We can win."

## Jacob Lawrence

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN FOR THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Jacob Lawrence, one of America's leading modern painters, died on June 9 at age 82. His work received critical acclaim throughout his long career, and his numerous honors and awards included the National Medal of Arts presented to him by President George Bush, the N.A.A.C.P.'s Spingarn Medal, and honorary degrees from over twenty colleges and universities, including Harvard and Yale. But I also remember him as a special friend to children and to the Children's Defense Fund and as a man who walked humbly on this earth. When my alma mater Spelman College gave him an honorary degree, I was struck by his quiet simplicity of manner. Jacob Lawrence was famous for his depictions of Black history and Black historical figures that hang in galleries and museums across the country, and he used the same talent and subject matter in children's book illustrations. I was especially honored when he provided the special signed and numbered limited edition silk-screen print Forward Together from his Harriet Tubman series to commemorate the Children's Defense Fund's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary.



Jacob Lawrence

This great artist and his siblings spent parts of their own childhood in foster homes before being reunited with their mother in Philadelphia and then moving with her to Harlem in 1930, when Jacob Lawrence was 13. His mother enrolled him in his first art classes, and when he dropped out of high school at 16 he worked at a laundry and a printing plant while continuing to attend classes with Charles Alston, the artist who became his mentor. At Alston's studio in the 1930's he met such leading figures of the Harlem Renaissance as writers Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, Ralph Ellison, and Richard Wright, painters Aaron Douglas and William Johnson, and sculptor Augusta Savage. Savage helped him get a job with the W.P.A. Federal Art Project, and this important step allowed him to begin painting as a career.

By the time Jacob Lawrence was 21 he had begun painting the kinds of multi-part series of narratives depicting Black history for which he is best known portraying figures like Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and Haitian slave rebellion leader Toussaint L'Ouverture. A 1940 grant from the Julius Rosenwald Fund allowed him to rent an \$8-a-month studio without heat or running water where he painted the signature work "The Migration of the American Negro," a series of 60 panels which told the story of the millions of

southern Blacks like his own parents who moved to Northern cities after World War I. The "Migration" series brought him national recognition and respect that lasted throughout the rest of the long career of painting and teaching he shared with his wife, artist Gwendolyn Knight. His work is in many museums, including the Metropolitan Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Whitney in New York and the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C.

The beauty and power of his bold, graphic style is easily captured in the versions of his paintings he used as children's book illustrations. The Great Migration: An American Story, Toussaint L'Ouverture: The Fight for Haiti's Freedom (text by Walter Dean Myers), John Brown: One Man Against Slavery (text by Gwen Everett), Harriet and the Promised Land, and Aesop's Fables capture children's imaginations and teach them about key events in Black history while exposing them to the work of one of the most important American artists. This may be an ideal opportunity to add one or more of these books to the summer reading lists of your children or other children you may know.

At the same time, reading these books could also lead to a visit to a local museum that holds one of Jacob Lawrence's paintings in order to enjoy the beauty of seeing them first-hand. When he was a young man, he would often walk the 60 blocks from his home to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to admire and study the paintings. Maybe there is a young boy or girl making the same trip today to admire his paintings who will grow up to be another Jacob Lawrence.

Forward together is on display at the Children's Defense Fund's office in Washington, D.C. and the former Alex Haley Farm, CDF's spiritual retreat and renewal center in Clinton, Tennessee. The print is taken from Through Forests, Through Rivers, Up Mountains, a 1967 work that was part of Jacob Lawrence's "Harriet and the Promised Land" series. I am awed every time I look at it again. In its striking colors and shapes, in the power of Harriet Tubman's extended hand gathering people in, and in the wooded and difficult path to freedom that men, women, and children are helping one another to travel together, he gives a powerful interpretation of Tubman's great vision for our people. I am so grateful for the tremendous gift Jacob Lawrence was given and his own lifelong generosity in sharing his gifts with others.

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