

# OPINION

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## Modern Lesson in Race Relations Gone Wrong

### Jena 6 prosecutor overstepped his authority

BY MARC H. MORIAL

Only hours after the mass protest in support of the Jena Six in northern Louisiana, Rosalyn Carpenter, the president of the Urban League affiliate in Middle Tennessee witnessed a rather frightful sight not too far away in Alexandria: two white youths, one allegedly under the influence of alcohol, and a red pick-up truck with two dangling yellow nooses.

The incident put a major damper on what was otherwise a "powerful journey of support" for the Jena Six, she told me.

The affiliate had joined together with Tennessee State University students and others to travel down there and observed a stark reminder of a shameful chapter of U.S. history.

Carpenter and her group weren't the only folks to be victimized by copy-cat noose hangers in recent weeks. Just days later, four nooses were hung at a high school in North Carolina. Weeks earlier, a similar incident occurred on the campus of the University of Maryland. A neo-Nazi

Web site recently listed the addresses and phone numbers of the Jena Six with the encouragement - "get in touch, and let them know justice is coming."

These events prove that racism isn't isolated to a small town of less than 3,000 based in the heart of what was once Ku Klux Klan country. But unlike in Jena where local authorities dismissed the hanging of nooses from a tree at the town's public high school as an innocent prank perpetuated in a "boys will be boys" spirit, Alexandria's mayor went to great lengths to bring justice to the perpetrators and to calm the nerves of African-Americans in the area.

"The police and city of Alexandria were very responsive to the incident and our safety. Mayor Jacques Roy got out of bed and came over to personally ensure us that we were safe," Carpenter told me. One of the youths - an 18-year-old male - was arrested.

Still, that such incidents continue to take place in this day and age tells us that we've still got some work to do and that we must exercise continued vigilance in protecting our civil rights more than half a century after the first civil rights movement.

In Jena, La., it all began more than a year ago when a black student dared to inquire about sitting under a tree where whites usually congregated. A day later, nooses in school colors dangled from said tree. The school's principal rightly recommended expulsion for the three white perpetrators but was overruled by the school board. Instead, they were sent to an alter-

native school for three months. When Jena High School students attempted to raise concerns about the incident, local district attorney Reed Walters antagonized them for complaining about an "innocent prank" and allegedly threatened to make their lives hell with the swift stroke of a pen.



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As Spelman College President Beverly Daniel Tatum noted in a Washington Post editorial, school officials and local au-

thorities in Jena were "unwilling to acknowledge the enduring power of the noose as a symbol of racial hatred and intimidation."

The relatively lenient punishment of the white students coupled with local authorities' indifference triggered an escalation of racial tensions and set off a series of confrontations. The unrest cul-

minated last December with the beating of a white classmate by six black youths now known as the Jena Six. But instead of charging them with misdemeanors, Walters threw the book at them - attempted murder charges. The weapon? A pair of tennis shoes.

In June, an all-white jury in the mostly-white town convicted 17-year-old Mychal Bell, who was 16 at the time of the incident, of aggravated battery, which carries a

sentence of up to 15 years. An appeals court threw out the conviction, concluding that Bell should have been tried as a juvenile. It bodes well for the fate of the remaining four charged as adults but fails to make up for the likelihood that the prosecutor's overzealousness will leave an indelible imprint on them for life.

Walters overstepped his authority much the way a North Carolina district attorney did in charging Duke lacrosse team members with rape. His actions must carry consequences with them to send a strong signal that unequal justice will not be permitted in 21st Century America.

Instead of throwing oil upon a smoldering fire, Jena authorities could have used the hanging of nooses, in the words of Tatum, as a "teachable moment - a catalyst for important discussions" about race relations past and present. Instead, they just allowed the fire to go out of control, making the entire town a victim.

The events that transpired serve as yet another reminder that our nation is damned to repeat history if we fail inform our future with our past.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.

### Vick can be Forgiven, but not Defended

BY JUNE POTTER ACOSTA

On her first day as co-host and moderator of the daytime talk show 'The View,' comedian Whoopi Goldberg spoke out in defense of the Atlanta Falcons' fallen football hero Michael Vick.

Vick, as we know has pleaded guilty to engaging in dog fighting, a hideous example of illegal gaming still going on in our 'civilized society.' To the prize quarterback's credit, he did apologize and express some contrition.

Goldberg said that from where Vick comes from in the South, "dog fighting isn't that unusual." In other words, it's traditional.

Remind Goldberg that it was also traditional, well into the 20th century, for white townsfolk to gather with blankets and picnic baskets to observe the spectacle of the lynching of a black man who had been accused of rape. No more proof of commission of the deed than the accusation by a white woman or her relative.

Retreating further into our history of slavery, before emancipation it was also traditional for a white master to choose a young black female for sexual purposes. The first instance of miscegenation.

My esteem for Thomas Jefferson, who had penned such profound and eloquent words in the 'Declaration of Independence', plummeted to zero when I learned that Jefferson, at age 46, had taken Sally Hemmings, just 16, as his mistress. She was his sister-in-law, half-sister to

his deceased wife, both fathered by the same white man. Supposedly, she strongly resembled his wife, though of course, with darker skin.

Sally bore Jefferson six children, during their years together, none of whom were ever acknowledged as his.

However, by the terms of his will, those six were freed, the only slaves -- not even Sally -- he emancipated.

To turn to a happier and more positive theme, I volunteer one morning a week, at Oregon Public Broadcasting in the Golden Hours Radio division. My boss, the station manager/program director, Jerry DeLaunay, is legally blind, though has earned a degree in broadcast journalism from California State University at Los Angeles.

Jerry and the volunteers, some disabled, all skilled in handling radio controls by touch alone, depend on their wonderful service dogs, who come along with them to work. I've seen these dear animals work, out on the street, and they are amazing.

Michael Vick has disgraced himself. However, we are all deserving of forgiveness, capable of learning and growing.

Vick needs to be acquainted with a whole new circle of friends, including these wonderful service dogs offering their unconditional love and loyalty.

June Potter Acosta is a long time civil-rights advocate from south-central Los Angeles who now lives in Portland. She is a regular contributor to the Portland Observer.



BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

### Overhaul No Child Left Behind Tests don't teach; empowered teachers do

The No Child Left Behind Act was designed to improve America's public schools. Passed in 2001, the law increased accountability in the nation's schools, putting pressure on school districts, principals and teachers to ensure students met federal progress standards.

From the very beginning, the law had its critics, and with good reason: The bill failed to adequately address the way resources were disproportionately distributed in public schools. It also ignored the fact that children learn in different ways, making standardized teaching and testing virtually ineffective. The bill is now up for renewal.

If it is to become the sweeping education reform tool that was originally envisioned, a major overhaul is needed. The first thing that needs to go? The 'teach to the test' mentality the law has created in our country's schools.

NCLB requires public schools in the U.S. to test students in third through eighth grades and 10th graders in reading and math at the end of each school year. If the school fails to meet annual progress goals two years in a row, it is put on 'school improvement' status and must, among other things, offer students the opportunity to attend another school in their district.

With the pressure to meet these annual goals and with such a narrow curriculum, school administrators in many districts have been forced to cut back on classes in science, the arts and even physical education. The result? Students who could, hopefully, pass a basic skills test, but who are not well-rounded, critical thinkers, adequately prepared for college or the workforce.

If NCLB is to really improve America's public schools, it needs to be rebuilt, from the bottom up. Schools must be given the autonomy to recruit, hire and coach qualified teachers.

Teachers must have the skills needed to develop a well-rounded curriculum based on their students' individual needs. Classroom sizes must be smaller; teachers need to be able to provide individual attention when needed. Tutoring programs must be improved.

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Funding must be provided to ensure social-service programs - stress and anger management, etc. - are worked into each school's overall plan. America must begin thinking of schools as community centers, where children can go to learn - about science, math and art, of course - but also about coping with life and growing into a responsible citizen.

A revamped NCLB must also make

sure states offer pre-kindergarten classes to all students; studies show students who attended pre-K do much better in school later on. Local leaders also must make sure parents know the classes are there. In Chicago, for instance, pre-K classes in black neighborhoods are relatively empty, even though black kids tend to benefit most from this early introduction to education.

Write your local legislator and remind them that tests don't teach. Empowered teachers and a rich, varied curriculum do. It is unwise to focus the nation's resources on reading and math, at the expense of other subjects and activities that play a critical part in the learning process. More importantly, focusing solely on test scores is detrimental to the intellectual health of our children and, ultimately, our nation.

Judge Greg Mathis is national vice president of Rainbow PUSH and a national board member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

### Letter to the Editor

César E. Chávez's work was rooted in his belief in peaceful and nonviolent action. Unfortunately, this same legacy of respect was not present during a recent neighborhood discussion of a street commemoration in his name.

As I've said before many times: good people can disagree. And many do in this case. The exchange of opinions is healthy for a community to better understand all sides of an issue. But when an opinion is delivered with negativity and disrespect, it is not healthy, it is de-

structive. And this should be unacceptable to every Portlander.

Will Rogers once said "you have to go out on a limb sometimes, because that is where the fruit is." I believe this is an opportunity for Portlanders on all sides to go out on that limb together. Yes, we might still come out disagreeing. But what we might achieve is a more authentic understanding of all the different people, places and things that truly make this City who and what it is today.

Urge all Portlanders to learn more

about this project and what it means the Latino community. Take the time to listen - and I mean really listen - before making a fearful reaction to the idea of change. More importantly in this debate, let's respect one another. For when we do this, we are really saying to one another "I respect your right to be here."

The Office of Transportation and Office of Neighborhood Involvement have planned two opportunities to learn about this proposal. I urge everyone interested to attend and respectfully share your opin-

ions with the City on this matter.

Community meetings on renaming Interstate Avenue to César E. Chávez Boulevard are Wednesday, Oct. 3 at Ockley Green Middle School, 6031 N. Montana Ave. from 6:30 p.m. to 8 p.m. and again Tuesday, Oct. 9 at Ockley Green, also from 6:30 p.m. to 8 p.m.

If you are unable to attend these meetings, please call my comment line at 503-823-4127 or email me at mayorpotter@ci.portland.or.us with your opinion.

Tom Potter, Mayor

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