



Antron McCray, a defendant wrongly accused as rape, and his mother walk to the courthouse. The story of injustice is portrayed in the Ken Burns documentary "The Central Park Five." (Photo by The Daily News/Courtesy IFC Films)

Wrongfully Convicted

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saults throughout the park.

The filmmakers astutely note the similarities between these press accounts and the press that preceded lynchings in the South decades before. When the beaten woman was found, police rounded up a number of these kids, interrogated them for hours, and eventually obtained confessions from four teenagers who barely knew each other; those four implicated a fifth.

The confessions were completely inconsistent with each other and inconsistent with the physical evidence, including DNA evidence. Each of the boys implicated the others, on promise of leniency which they did not receive. They and their families, functioning without counsel, were helpless and easily manipulated. The boys were between the ages of 14 and 16, and all recanted their confessions shortly after and have maintained their innocence ever since.

One of the remarkable things about these young men is how they come across in telling their stories. They seem remarkably present and real, wounded but not hard-bitten. Part of what makes this film so important is the respect they are accorded by the filmmakers, who have obviously taken the time to earn their trust.

Some of the reviews I've read complain that the filmmakers did not push harder to find out if any of the men were among the kids who committed other crimes that night, something they all deny. To me, given the

lack of evidence that the five men committed the crimes for which they served time and the extent of the evidence that someone else did, that complaint indicates a very persistent desire of the dominant culture to find some reason to excuse injustice by continuing to dig for more evidence that its victims somehow brought it on themselves.

The filmmakers' choice, instead, to focus on the point of view of the accused men seemed to me an appropriate and rarely seen counterbalance to the enormous energy devoted to prosecuting them and pillorying them in the press. It allows a flavor of the fear, naivete, and utter disenfranchisement that contributed to five children confessing to such heinous crimes.

What comes across is how social inequalities functioned in this case. These boys and their families were expendable. They did not have a sense of their rights, or a sense that they even had rights. I can't think of a film that has done a comparable job of reflecting on the real implications of such disenfranchisement.

All the while that these young men sat accused and then convicted, law enforcement had the DNA of a serial rapist who was the real perpetrator, and whose DNA was found at the scene. They did not bother to investigate any other theories, though, after obtaining four confessions that jibed neither with each other nor with the evidence at the scene.

The truth would never had come

out had not the actual perpetrator confessed. Even then, forces quickly united to protect the police from any criticism. The lawsuit the men filed against the city remains pending after 10 years. Far from making right even some small bit of what was wrongly taken from these men, the city and the police force remains defiant.

The film does a heroic job of marshalling and making what sense is possible of these ultimately inscrutable details. It should be required viewing, especially for anyone involved in the criminal justice system, not least because it provides an occasion for deep reflection on our collective blindness to institutional oppression.

As expressed on camera by historian Craig Steven Wilder, "Rather than tying up [the case] in a bow and

thinking that there was something we can take away from it, and that we'll be better people, I think what we really need to realize is that we're NOT very good people."

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