



Thousands Protest in Support of Jena Six

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[Sorry, the video for this story has expired, but you can still read the transcript below.]

MARGARET WARNER: Now the criminal prosecution of six students in Jena, Louisiana, and the national reaction it has provoked. Jeffrey Brown begins our coverage with some background.

JEFFREY BROWN: Today's marches in Jena, Louisiana, a town of about 3,500, were to protest the treatment of Mychal Bell and five fellow African-American high school classmates who have become known as the Jena Six.

THE REVEREND AL SHARPTON, Civil Rights Activist: No justice...

CROWD: No peace!

AL SHARPTON: Free the Jena Six!

JEFFREY BROWN: Bell was convicted in June by an all-white jury on adult felony counts of aggravated battery and conspiracy in the beating of a white schoolmate.

The troubles in Jena began last September, when a black student asked his principal if he could sit under this tree, known as the white tree, traditionally a gathering spot for Jena High School's white students. He was told "yes" and did. The next day, two nooses were found hanging from the tree's limbs. The three white students involved were suspended for the act but not charged with any crime.

That set in motion a string of racially motivated incidents, including a series of fights, a fire set in the main building of Jena High School, and then, in December, the beating of Justin Barker by Mychal Bell and five friends. Barker was treated and released the same day from a local hospital.

His six attackers were charged first with attempted murder and expelled from school. The murder charges were later reduced. Jena's black community protested that the black students had been dealt with far more harshly than the whites.

Last Friday, the conviction of Mychal Bell was overturned by the state court of appeals on grounds that he should have been charged as a minor. But Bell, who had a prior juvenile record of violence, remains in jail as prosecutors consider an appeal.

In Jena, some local residents said the demonstrators coming from outside were overreacting.

JENA RESIDENT: I just want people to know that we're not all racists. A lot of this got blown out of proportion from a lot of them not getting their facts straight.

JEFFREY BROWN: But some protestors say this case is emblematic of a wider problem.

JENA PROTESTOR: Jena is just a microcosm of what is happening in the United States as a whole.

JEFFREY BROWN: And the shade tree at the center of the dispute? School officials recently cut it down.



Howard Witt

Chicago Tribune

Racial tensions in Jena

MARGARET WARNER: Jeff spoke to two people on the scene in Louisiana earlier this evening.

JEFFREY BROWN: And now we're joined from Jena by Howard Witt, a correspondent for the Chicago Tribune. He's been covering the story since this spring.

Howard, the prosecutor in the case has denied that race played any factor, correct?

HOWARD WITT, The Chicago Tribune: Yes. Yesterday, the prosecutor, Reed Walters, broke his long silence on the case and came out and talked to reporters. He said that race had nothing to do with this, he was simply prosecuting what he called a "brutal crime," and he indicated that he didn't understand what the furor was about.

JEFFREY BROWN: Now, you've been reporting this case for some time. Do people there tell you that the racial tensions are longstanding?

HOWARD WITT: Indeed, they are. White people generally in this town will deny that, but black people will tell you all kinds of stories. And there's lots of emblems of that in this town.

There's a barbershop in town where the barber refuses to cut black men's hair. He says that that would anger his white clients, because they don't want him using the same utensils on blacks as whites.

This is a town that in 1991, when David Duke, the former leader of the Ku Klux Klan, ran for governor of Louisiana, the white voters of this town delivered the vast majority of their votes for David Duke. So there's a lot of indicators in this town that there's some pretty harsh racial attitudes.

JEFFREY BROWN: On the other hand, we've shown some white residents in our set-up who think that they're being unfairly portrayed. Are you hearing a lot of that from the white residents in town?

HOWARD WITT: Yes, indeed. Many of them do say that. Today, many of the white residents were out on their front porches standing with their arms crossed, glaring as the demonstrators walked past. They were pretty much insistent that their town is being unfairly portrayed.

But what you have here is really just a profound difference in perceptions of the racial divide which we see across the country. Basically, the whites here did not think that the noose incident was any big deal. They all think it was a prank and a joke. Whereas black people here and across the country, when you tell them about it, they are profoundly troubled by it, because nooses are such a potent and hateful symbol for them.

A celebratory but somber event

JEFFREY BROWN: Now, what was the atmosphere like there today?

HOWARD WITT: I would have to say it was almost celebratory. This was like the biggest black family reunion you've ever been to. You had tens of thousands of African-Americans here from across the country. Many of them rode for 20 hours or more on buses to get here. They were chanting; they were marching.

They were all -- there was young, old. There were people pushing kids in strollers. There were old people in wheelchairs. It was really a very celebratory, but also somber event, in which people felt they had to be here to witness this demonstration.

JEFFREY BROWN: So what happens next in the legal case? Mychal Bell remains in custody, correct?

HOWARD WITT: Yes, he does. And the prosecutor, district attorney, has vowed to continue to prosecute him now in juvenile court, apparently. He's also said nothing about reducing the charges against the other five defendants. So the prosecutor is pretty much digging in his heels and intends to go forward with this case.

A lot of the civil rights leaders here are hopeful that now that this case is in the wider court of public opinion that perhaps he'll come under some political pressures to relent, but the prosecutor himself shows no signs of that.

JEFFREY BROWN: Although I understand that the prosecutor yesterday had also something more to say about the original incident involving the nooses?

HOWARD WITT: He did. It was actually quite remarkable. Every town leader, the school superintendent, the mayor, and every other white town leader here has insisted that the nooses were a prank, they were a joke, they didn't matter.

Yesterday, Reed Walters, the prosecutor, actually said the noose incident was not a prank. He said it was a disgusting and abhorrent action that brought disgrace upon the town. And he lamented, he said, that he couldn't find a way to actually charge those white students with any crime. He said he looked but couldn't find an applicable statute that would apply.

JEFFREY BROWN: All right, Howard Witt of the Chicago Tribune, thanks very much.

HOWARD WITT: My pleasure.