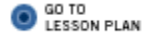


# Louisiana Protest Echoes the Civil Rights Era

By RICHARD G. JONES



## Knowledge Tools

Turn Vocabulary On: [Link words to the Merriam-Webster Collegiate® Dictionary.](#)

Turn Geography On: [Link countries and states to the Merriam-Webster Atlas®](#)

JENA, La., Sept. 20 — In a slow-moving march that filled streets, spilled onto sidewalks and stretched for miles, more than 10,000 demonstrators rallied Thursday in this small town to protest the treatment of six black teenagers arrested in the beating of a white schoolmate last year.

Chanting slogans from the civil rights era and waving signs, protesters from around the nation converged in central Louisiana, where the charges have made this otherwise anonymous town of 3,000 people a high-profile arena in the debate on racial bias in the judicial system.

"That's not prosecution, that's persecution," the Rev. Jesse Jackson, the founder of the RainbowPUSH Coalition and an organizer of the demonstration, told a crowd in front of the LaSalle Parish Courthouse. "We will not stop marching until justice runs down like waters."

The Jena High School students, known as the Jena Six, are part of a court case that began in December, when they were accused of beating a white classmate unconscious and kicking him and a prosecutor charged them with attempted murder.

The beating was preceded by racially charged incidents at the high school, including nooses hanging from an oak tree that some students felt was just for white students. The tree has been cut down.

One student, Mychal Bell, 17, was convicted in June of aggravated battery and conspiracy. Those charges were voided by appeals courts, most recently last Friday. Mr. Bell has not been released from jail.

Even as demonstrators marched in Jena, which is 85 percent white, an appellate court ordered an emergency hearing to determine why Mr. Bell had not been released.

Mr. Bell is the sole student who has had a trial. Amid pressure from critics, prosecutors have gradually scaled back many charges against the other five.

Although the starting incident occurred about a year ago, the case has been slow to join the national conversation. After Mr. Bell's conviction, though, the details spread quickly on the Internet, text messaging and black talk radio.

The case has drawn the attention of President Bush, who said to reporters in Washington on Thursday, "Events in Louisiana have saddened me."

"I understand the emotions," Mr. Bush said. "The Justice Department and the F.B.I. are monitoring the situation down there, and all of us in America want there to be fairness when it comes to justice."

Students, particularly those at historically black colleges, have also had a pivotal role in spreading the details. They poured into town after all-night bus rides. Many said they were happy to pick up the torch of the civil rights struggle.

"This is the first time something like this has happened for our generation," said Eric Depradine, 24, a senior at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. "You always heard about it from history books and relatives. This is a chance to experience it for ourselves."

A sophomore schoolmate, Charley Caldwell Jr., 22, said he was moved to attend the rally by the details of the case.

"When I first heard about it," Mr. Caldwell said, "I thought it was obscene. So I felt I had to come. When we got here, there's nothing but white people, and they aren't used to seeing this many people of color."

The case also resonates for people not in college.

April Jones, 17, who traveled from Atlanta, with her parents, Diana and Derrick, said she saw the problem as one of basic fairness. Ms. Jones could not understand why the students who hung the nooses were not punished severely.

The students were briefly suspended. District Attorney J. Reed Walters said Wednesday that the action did not appear to violate any state laws.

"I just feel like every time the white people did something," Ms. Jones said, "they dropped it, and every time the black people did something, they blew it out of proportion."

Mr. Walters sharply criticized the nooses on Wednesday, saying: "I cannot overemphasize what a villainous act that was. The people that did it should be ashamed of what they unleashed on this town."

A marcher, Latese Brown, 40, of Alexandria, said, "If you can figure out how to make a school yard fight into an attempted murder charge, I'm sure you can figure out how to make stringing nooses into a hate crime."

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