

# BLOOD AT THE ROOT CURRICULUM GUIDE

## THE EVENTS OF THE JENA SIX

*A number of events linked to an alleged escalation of racial tensions took place in and around Jena in the months preceding the assault on student Justin Barker. These events included the hanging of nooses from a tree in the high school courtyard, two violent confrontations between white and black youths, and the destruction by fire of the main building of Jena High School.*

### Jena Six Timeline

**Aug 31, 2006:** During a Jena High School assembly, a black male freshman student asked permission to sit in the shade of the “white tree” (where traditionally only white students sat). The principal responded that the students could “sit wherever they wanted.” That afternoon, he and his friends sat under the tree.

**Sep 1, 2006:** The next morning, two or three nooses were found hanging from the tree — a clear reference to the historical lynching of blacks once widely practiced by white racists, especially in the southern states of the US.

- When the principal learned that three white students were responsible, he recommended expulsion from the school but was overruled by the local Board of Education. They were instead punished with a three day in-school suspension.
- School Superintendent Roy Breithaupt agreed with the Board and said, “Adolescents play pranks. I don’t think it was a threat against anybody.”
- Local black residents said this further inflamed racial tensions in the town.
- A group of black students staged a silent protest under the “white tree.”

**Sep 6, 2006:** The principal called a student assembly, in which students sat in segregated black and white sections. LaSalle Parish District Attorney J. Reed Walters addressed the assembly and is alleged to have threatened the protesters that if they didn’t stop complaining about an “innocent prank”, he could “take [their] lives away with the stroke of a pen.”

**Sep 7, 2006:** Police began patrolling the halls of Jena High School.

**Sep 8, 2006:** The school was declared to be in “total lockdown.”

**Sep 10, 2006:** Dozens of black students attempted to address the school board but were refused because the board believed “the noose issue” had been resolved.

- Racially charged confrontations between white and black students continued throughout the fall.

**Nov 30, 2006:** The main building of Jena High School was set on fire and later needed to be gutted and demolished. Black and white students blamed each other for the arson.

## BLOOD AT THE ROOT CURRICULUM GUIDE

**Dec 1, 2006:** At a mostly-white party held at the Fair Barn, five black students attempted to enter the party but were told they were not allowed in without an invitation. They persisted and said they had friends who were already at the party. A white man confronted the students and a fight ensued, which caused him to also be banned from the party.

- Outside, the black students became involved in another fight with a group of white men (not students). Sixteen year-old Robert Bailey (later one of the Jena Six) alleged that a beer bottle had been broken over his head, although there are no medical records to indicate treatment was provided.

**Dec 2, 2006:** A white student who had attended the previous night's party encountered Robert Bailey and his friends at a convenience store. An argument ensued and the white student is alleged to have run back to his pickup truck and produced a 12-gauge shotgun. Bailey said he wrestled the gun from the white student and took it home with him. Because the white and black students' versions of events contradicted each other, police formed a report based on the testimony of an independent witness.

- Bailey was charged with theft of a firearm, second-degree robbery and disturbing the peace. The white student was not charged.

**Dec 4, 2006:** Jena High School student Justin Barker, 17, was allegedly beaten unconscious by black students including Robert Bailey. It was reported that Barker had boasted earlier in the day that Bailey had been beaten by a white man at the party on Dec 1st, which Barker denied. Barker was treated at the local hospital and released after two hours. He attended a school function that evening.

- Meanwhile, the six black students accused of the attack were arrested. Robert Bailey, Mychal Bell, Carwin Jones, Bryant Purvis and Theo Shaw were initially charged with assault. The sixth suspect, Jesse Ray Beard, was charged as a juvenile because he was 14 years old.
- District Attorney Walters upgraded the assault charges to attempted murder.

**June 26, 2007:** On the first day of Mychal Bell's trial, in which he was tried as an adult, Walters agreed to reduce the charges for Bell to aggravated second-degree battery and conspiracy to commit the same crime, arguing that the "deadly weapon" used was Bell's tennis shoes, to which the jury agreed. There were conflicting witness accounts on whether Bell had been involved in the attack.

- Bell was found guilty and faced a sentence of up to 22 years in prison. He was remanded in custody to be sentenced on September 20, 2007. There was public outcry because Bell's public defender did not call any witnesses in his attempt to defend his client.
- Later, Mr. Bell received new defense attorneys who requested a new trial on the grounds that Bell, who was 16 years old at the time of the incident, should not have been tried as an adult. They also argued that the new trial should be held in another parish.

## BLOOD AT THE ROOT CURRICULUM GUIDE

**Aug 24, 2007:** A request to lower Bell's \$90,000 bond was denied due to his juvenile record, which showed that he had been previously convicted of four violent crimes.

**Sep 4, 2007:** A judge dismissed the conspiracy charge but upheld the battery conviction, although he agreed that Bell should have been tried as a juvenile.

- On this day, charges against Carwin Jones and Theo Shaw were reduced to aggravated second-degree battery and conspiracy.

**Sep 10, 2007:** Charges against Robert Bailey were reduced to aggravated second-degree battery and conspiracy.

**Sep 14, 2007:** Bell's conviction for battery was overturned by Louisiana's Third Circuit Court of Appeals in Lake Charles on the grounds that he should not have been tried as an adult. District Attorney Reed appealed to the Louisiana Supreme Court.

**Sep 20, 2007:** On the day Bell was initially due to be sentenced, the Third Circuit Court of Appeal in Lake Charles ordered a district judge to hold a hearing on why Bell is still being held in jail.