

# Continuing the Fight

## Civil Rights Lawyer Refuses to Back Down

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On the evening of January 16, prior to his speech in Memorial Hall, I was able to sit down with Morris Dees of the Southern Poverty Law Center to talk about his views regarding race, politics and American opinion.

Dees became interested in the particular field for which he has become famous after returning home to a very rural society in which poverty and racism were rampant. Being the first in his family to go to college, he never forgot where he grew up and how it continues to affect his life. The celebrated lawyer started what would eventually grow in to the SPLC by taking cases of his neighbors, who were often disregarded by the more urban-minded lawyers.

Among his most celebrated cases are: the fight to integrate a YMCA summer camp in Montgomery, Alabama (1967); his successful decision against Tom Metzger, leader of the White Aryan Resistance (1988); and the United Klans of America, who were responsible for the murders of civil rights worker Viola Liuzzo, teenager Michael Donald and the infamous bombing of the 16th Avenue Baptist Church (Birmingham, Ala.) which killed four Sunday School children.

Early on in the conversation, Dees raised the all-too-important



issue of the transfer of white Americans from being a majority in the United States to becoming a minority within the next fifty years. He also remarked that in this dynamic shift, black Americans will become, for the first time in U.S. history, only the second largest minority in the country.

Our conversation quickly progressed to what he thought students could do to promote racial and social justice. I brought up the concern that there are systematic built-in mechanisms within the American socio-economic construct that actively promote racial and social injustice. In a point that he later elaborated on during his speech, he gave his personal example of being a white law school graduate from the University of Alabama. His skin color in effect was his bar examination. Black law school graduates, regardless of where

they matriculated, were required to take the examination for admission to the bar. This is a classic example of affirmative action, however, for the benefit of whites, as Dees contends it has been and continues to be for the most part in America's storied history.

Dees responded that in addition to the public work being visibly carried out by such groups as the NAACP and the Black Student Movement, there are more subtle things all students can participate in regardless of their comfort level. Acceptance was foremost on his list of methods by which to effect change. Simply talking to one another was another striking suggestion of his. It has often been noted that it is harder to discriminate against or even to have a strong dislike for someone who you have broken bread with or spoken to.

In concluding our interview he stated that "(America) has come far yet we have so much more to go."

