

# News at a Glance

## Head of Mississippi Legislative Black Caucus no longer opposes Pickering

JACKSON, Miss. (AP) - The head of the Mississippi Legislative Black Caucus says he no longer opposes U.S. District Judge Charles Pickering's appeals court nomination - a surprising turnabout that could cost him his position.

State Rep. Phillip West, a Democrat, said in statement last week that he was speaking only for himself and not for the full caucus. The 45-member caucus has vigorously opposed Pickering's nomination to the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

Pickering, nominated to the New Orleans-based court by President Bush, has been criticized by black organizations for his record on civil rights issues, including his decision to seek a lighter sentence for a convicted cross-burner.

In February, Pickering and his son, U.S. Rep. Chip Pickering, R-Miss., met privately with caucus members, most of whom had signed a petition stating their opposition to the nomination.

The judge explained how he took heat for testifying against a Ku Klux Klan imperial wizard, Sam Bowers, in a 1968 murder trial.

"That struck home with me because I know that feeling," said West, who has also been active in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. "I have been ostracized and shunned by both blacks and whites and characterized as a racist myself."

West said he waited to take a public stance on the Pickering nomination because he wanted to persuade the caucus to drop its opposition. When the caucus didn't act, he said, he issued his own statement.

Bush renominated Charles Pickering this year after opposition from key Democrats derailed the nomination a year ago. The Republicans took back control of the Senate this year.

## Tuskegee Airman 'Doc' Perez mourned

(Special to the NNPA) - Andrew "Doc" Perez, one of the original Tuskegee Airmen, the World War II fighter squadron that never lost a bomber, died May 5 at ManorCare Health Services in Oak Lawn, Ill.

Perez was affectionately known as "Doc" after he received a doctorate of optometry from the Monroe School. The school later became part of the Illinois College of Optometry.

In the 1960s and '70s, Perez taught math and science at Chicago's Hyde Park Academy High School. His students included Illinois Rep. Connie Howard (D-Chicago).

"I had known him as Mr. Perez, my science teacher," Howard told reporters. Howard had last seen Perez when the Tuskegee Airmen turned out in support of the recently closed Meigs Field, a public airport in Chicago.

Perez served as first vice president of the Chicago chapter of the Tuskegee Airmen for two terms, where he volunteered with the Experimental Aircraft Association's Young Eagles flight program. The program has introduced more than 6,000 Chicago-area children to aviation, according to Friends of Meigs Field member Steve Whitney.

Serving with more than 900 airmen, Perez fought alongside some of the nation's first black aviators. Recognition for the servicemen, however, didn't come until long after they endured systemic discrimination and the prevailing notion in the military that African-Americans didn't have the skills to fly fighter aircraft.

Despite their success, the airmen were often confronted with requirements such as having to give up train seats to German prisoners of war, Perez and other airmen told the Chicago Tribune in 2000. Perez is survived by his wife, Bobbie.

## Woman involved in Lyons scandal dies

TAMPA, Fla. (AP) - The woman whose relationship with Rev. Henry Lyons led to the downfall of his ministry and the revelation of a massive financial scandal involving the National Baptist Convention died in prison last week, federal authorities said. She was 46.

Bernice Edwards died at the federal prison in Pekin, Ill., where she was due to be released in June. Edwards was serving a nine-month prison term for violating her probation on federal tax evasion charges.

Edwards died after a two-month hospitalization for a chronic pulmonary condition, prison officials said in a release. An autopsy is pending to determine the official cause of death, officials said.

Edwards was a convicted embezzler who was working as a publicist for the organization Lyons headed, the National Baptist Convention. It is one of the nation's largest black church denominations.

In 1997, the reverend's wife, Deborah Lyons, discovered her husband secretly owned a \$700,000 waterfront mansion with Lyons and set the mansion on fire. The ensuing investigation revealed that Lyons and Edwards had used church proceeds to buy other properties, jewelry and luxury cars.

Prosecutors accused Lyons and Edwards of stealing more than \$4 million from corporations wanting to sell cemetery products, life insurance policies and credit cards to the Nashville-based convention's 8.5 million members.

Edwards, the mother of three children, had gone to work for Lyons after leaving a trail of criminal charges and financial misdeeds in Milwaukee. There, she was convicted of embezzling federal funds from a school for at-risk children.

In 1999, Edwards was acquitted in state court of racketeering, but later that year was convicted in federal court on two counts of tax evasion. She was sentenced to 21 months in prison and three years of probation.

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# Suit questions cops' role in death

Rising football star was just 22 when he died last year

BY GENOA BARROW THE SACRAMENTO OBSERVER

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (NNPA) - On May 30, 2002, Anthony Vontoure's roommates thought he needed medical assistance and called for help. Instead of an ambulance, officers with the Sacramento County Sheriff's Department arrived.

What happened next is the subject of a wrongful death lawsuit, filed by renowned civil rights attorney John Burris on behalf of Vontoure's family. Named in the suit are the County of Sacramento, Sheriff Lou Blanas, an Officer T. Wetzel, and an Officer G. Saunders.

"The reason for filing is to find out what happened," said Anthony's father, Michael Vontoure Sr. He was joined at the filing at the downtown U.S. District Court building by his former wife and Anthony's mother, Emma; current wife, Mari; and eldest son, Michael Jr.

"We couldn't and didn't get any information from any officials. So we asked Mr. Burris to look into it and see what information he could get concerning what actually happened. We didn't get a chance to see his body; we didn't get a chance to see the police report," Vontoure said.

The Sacramento Coroner's Office ruled that 22-year-old Anthony Vontoure's death was

caused by "acute cocaine intoxication." While the Vontoures concede that a "trace" amount of cocaine was present in their son's body at the time of his death, they maintain that excessive force by the sheriff's deputies killed him.

An excerpt from the lawsuit reads: "Plaintiffs allege on information and belief that during the struggle with Anthony Vontoure defendant Officer Wetzel or his trainee, defendant Officer Saunders, assaulted and battered Anthony Vontoure, causing injuries to his face, head and body. Plaintiffs allege that defendant officers used excessive and unreasonable force against the decedent. Plaintiffs further allege that defendant Officer Wetzel and/or defendant Officer Saunders asphyxiated decedent Anthony Vontoure by use of a choke hold on his neck or by some other means of restricting his ability to breathe."

The suit also alleges the officers failed to call for needed medical assistance until after they determined Vontoure was already deceased.

In order to get answers, the family had an independent autopsy performed.

"That allowed us in many ways to compare what the coroner said happened with what we believed happened," Burris said.

"Having been involved with this case from the very (onset), I was able to, for myself, to observe the body itself. I was somewhat shocked by the various discolorations that were consistent with bruising and trauma on the body," he continued.



Photo by Larry Dalton/Sacramento Observer  
Emma Vontoure holds a picture of her son, Anthony, in his University of Washington football uniform.

See Lawsuit on A10

# Jackson criticizes 'Bama for picking white coach

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

MONTGOMERY, Ala. - The Rev. Jesse Jackson criticized the University of Alabama Friday for selecting Mike Shula as its new head football coach over Green



Jackson

Bay assistant Sylvester Croom. Shula is white and Croom is black.

"The SEC maintains a culture of excluding blacks beyond the playing field," Jackson said in a statement. "White players, beyond the playing field, can expect to become coaches, athletic directors and college presidents. Blacks have no life beyond the playing field."

Alabama President Robert Witt and Athletic Director Mal Moore told Jackson before they hired Shula that they were considering minority candidates for the job.



Croom

Croom was interviewed last week along with Shula and Carolina Panthers coach

Richard Williamson.

He issued a statement Friday extending his congratulations to Shula.

"To the numerous Alabama fans and former players who expressed their desire to see me return to Tuscaloosa, I express my sincere gratitude," Croom said.

Jackson called Alabama's efforts "smoke and mirrors."

Alabama Sen. Charles Steele, president of the state's

chapter of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, was equally scathing.

"It's a sad day in Alabama," Steele told The Tuscaloosa News Friday. "They missed an opportunity. It's been 40 years since George Wallace stood in the schoolhouse door at the university. This would have sent a great message to the world that Alabama has changed."

Steele said he believes

Croom was never seriously considered for the job.

"It's a disservice to people who are looking for the American dream in terms of hard work, paying their dues, getting prepared and qualified, and then your own refuses to accept you because of the color of your skin," he said.

Jackson said he plans to discuss the situation with the NCAA and the Black Coaches Association.

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