

NATIONAL

Students from HBCUs head to Jena

Sha'Day Jackson
BLACK COLLEGE WIRE

Shelbia Brown, a senior at North Carolina Central University in Durham, N.C., was just one of many students from historically black colleges and universities who headed to Jena, La., for Sept. 20 demonstrations. They hope to support the six African American teenagers known as the "Jena Six."

"We need to let people know that we have a voice and that our voice needs to be heard," Brown said. "This is an opportunity for young people to show that they are about change and progression."

Brown, the editor-in-chief of the Campus Echo, North Carolina Central's student newspaper, was planning to travel with 57 other students, advisers and counselors to Jena on Sept. 19.

The Jena Six case involves six African Americans accused of beating a white fellow student, Justin

Barker, in a schoolyard fight after a series of events that included nooses found hanging under a campus tree. Protesters have said the charges, which included attempted murder, are disproportionate.

Although Mychal Bell's aggravated battery conviction was overturned on Sept. 14 by the Third Circuit Court of Appeal in Lake Charles, La., LaSalle Parish District Attorney Reed Walters can still appeal the court's decision. The court ruled that Bell should not have been tried as an adult, that he "was not tried on an offense which could have subjected him to the jurisdiction of the criminal court."

The ruling said that Bell's case remains "exclusively in juvenile court." Along with Robert Bailey Jr., 17, Theo Shaw, 17, Carwin Jones, 18, Bryant Purvis, 17, and a minor identified in news reports as Jesse Beard, 15, Bell, then 16,

was originally charged with attempted second-degree murder in the attack on Barker last December.

Brown said she was grateful to hear about the ruling, but realized there were five other young men awaiting a trial date who are still charged with aggravated battery and attempted second degree murder.

At North Carolina Central, "We still want to be there to support all six," said the Durham, N.C., native. "But there's still more people that we hope things will turn around for. It's not just for Mychal Bell, but all of them."

North Carolina Central is not the only HBCU that was represented during the protests and march. Students from Howard, Grambling State, Southern and Winston-Salem State universities, to name a few, were present. An NAACP contingent, the Revs. Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton,

and Martin Luther King Jr. III were among the thousands at the march and protest.

Brown said she hoped that the protests would be as peaceful as possible, but realized that might not be the case.

"Our advisers were telling us that there may be people there who are opposed to what we are doing," she said.

Jena is a rural Central Louisiana town with a population of around 2,900 and about 350 black residents. "I'm aware that this is a racially divided town. It could possibly turn things the wrong way," Brown said.

At Tuskegee University in Tuskegee, Ala., Blair Jackson, a senior sales and marketing major, created her own way to support the Jena Six on Sept. 20.

Starting Sept. 19 and 20, Jackson and six other students sold ribbons for a dol-

lar at various locations on campus. Jackson said she will use this opportunity to educate. "I'm just trying to help students to be more aware and maybe they can have a 'take action' mindset for another situation that may come up," she said. Jackson invested \$40 of her own money in the effort.

She was not able to attend the Sept. 20 protests, but creating a symbol of support would be just as right, she said.

"Forty dollars versus thousands of dollars in bail money is nothing," Jackson said. She is using the ribbons to collect money for the families of the Jena Six. "When you are thinking about someone's life being taken away, it doesn't seem that much."

Jackson and the other students hope to raise \$2,000 for the families to use for gas money, food, bail money and "whatever they need," she said. She also plans to

take the money to Cseptla Bailey, the mother of Robert Bailey Jr., in Jena.

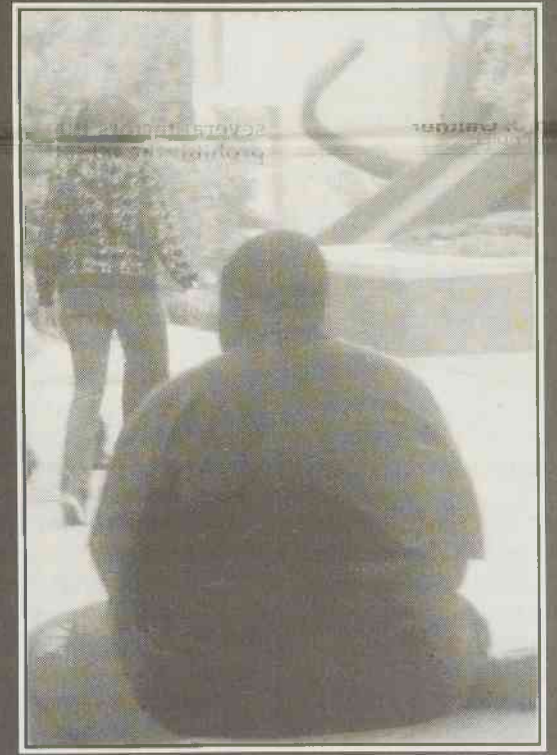
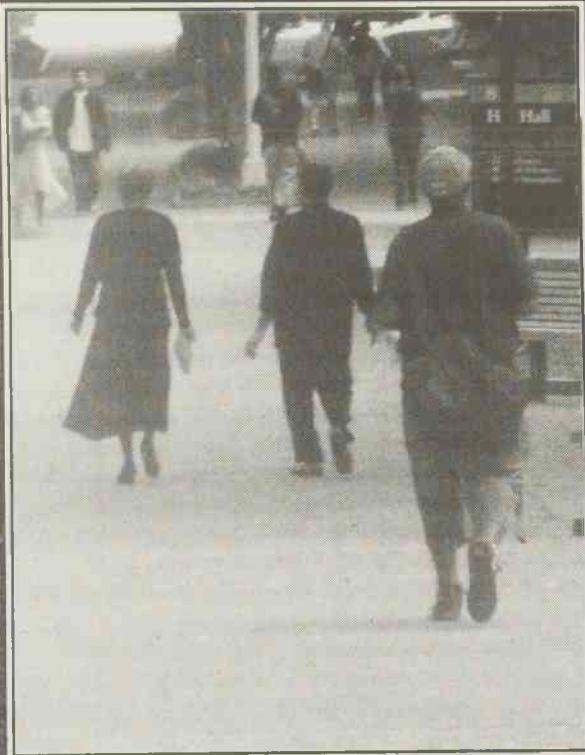
After looking up Bailey's phone number in the online white pages, Jackson took a chance and gave left her a message.

"I just told her that Tuskegee students wanted to send donations directly to the families," she said. Jackson said Bailey returned the call and was happy and very excited that another HBCU was doing something to support them.

Traveling 15 hours on a charter bus in the southern heat and missing classes and work seemed to be sacrifices for Brown, but she said being in Jena Sept. 20 just felt like the right thing to do.

"We are kind of getting a taste of what it was like during the civil rights era," Brown said.

WSSU students show support for march on Jena by wearing black



On Sept. 24, students wore black as a part of the "Jena Six" protest.

Photos by Steven Gaitner

Thousands demanded, 'Free the Jena Six'

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Black T-shirts, purple ribbons, the U.S. and black liberation flags swinging high, handmade posters, picket signs and fists clenched while rising to the sky: This was the uniform for many of the thousands of people, black and white, who marched two miles from the Ward 10 Recreational Park in Jena, La., to the LaSalle Parish courthouse declaring, "Free the Jena Six."

"It was a very moving event," said Mikal Alkhatib, a senior at Fort Valley State University in Fort Valley, Ga. "This march showed how much the U.S. needs to stop focusing so much on issues like foreign policy and more toward the domestic issues such as [the] Jim Crow ... that does still exist."

"Things like this need to happen every now and then for every generation to get a better understand-

ing of the Civil Rights Movement that happened before," Alkhatib, a political science major, said of the Sept. 20 event.

The Jena Six case involves six African American teenagers accused of beating a white fellow student, Justin Barker, in a schoolyard fight after a series of events that included nooses found hanging under a campus tree. Protesters have said the charges, which included attempted murder, are disproportionate.

The aggravated battery conviction of Mychal Bell, one of the six, was overturned by the Third Court of Appeals in Lake Charles, La., on Sept. 14. Some of the marchers, especially students at historically black colleges and universities, said they felt the need to be present to support the other five teenagers as well. Some said it was an emotional experience; they felt proud to be part of a protest against what they believed to be racial injustice.

Other HBCUs represented included Grambling State, Dillard, Savannah State, North Carolina Central, Winston-Salem State, and Howard universities, among others. Some white students, from both HBCUs and majority-white universities, were also present.

Ashley Sgarlata, a student at

Hunter College in New York, said she was upset about how blacks had been persecuted over the centuries.

"I just don't feel like, 'oh, I'm a white person and it's different,'" Sgarlata, who traveled with the Harlem Revolution Club, said. "I'm just moving in solidarity for a cause that matters."

The Rev. Jesse Jackson kicked off the march about 10 a.m. at the park.

Before proceeding, Jackson warned marchers to be aware of "those who may try to insist their way into the crowds."

However, most businesses in Jena were closed because of the protests. Marchers were not taunted and there was no direct sign of opposition.

Jackson led the marchers, who walked in the hot sun with portable fans, towels on their heads and expressions of unity on their faces.

"The spirit of the people, speaking in harmony, saying 'excuse me' if you bumped into someone, showed how much we respect one another," said Michael Muhammed of the Nation of Islam in Fort Worth, Texas.

The New Black Panther Party for Self Defense, the NAACP, the Southern Christian Leadership

Conference, the Rainbow/Push Coalition and the Rev. Al Sharpton's National Action Network were some of the other organizations represented.

"I pray that our voices are heard and that the rest of the country will see that there is still racism and prejudice here," said Nicole Benson, a senior at Howard University. They don't need "to put a tent over it like it has been fought off."

Vince Chatman, who traveled from Jackson State in Jackson, Miss., with three others, said he was there to support the cause. "Not only is it an ethical thing, but it's a godly thing to come and support what's right," he said.

The day started with a rally at 8 a.m. Celebrities and prominent speakers such as "Cousin Jeff" Johnson of BET and comedian Rickey Smiley encouraged the crowd, which was estimated at between 5,000 and 40,000, to be committed to the fight against racial injustice.

Student representatives from North Carolina Central, Spelman and Howard were among the many who spoke.

Before the march, Walter M. Kimbrough, president of Philander Smith College in Arkansas, said his was the only college or univer-

sity in the state, and one of just two organizations sending buses. "Roughly 20 percent of our entire student body is attending, a bold statement that shows our students are committed to our new social justice initiative," he said.

Xavier University said more than 170 students would be riding buses in a trip coordinated by Xavier's NAACP student chapter, Student Government Association and Activities Board.

Prairie View A&M University said it would have more than 120 students, faculty and administrators at the protest rally on the courthouse steps.

"The Jena 6 case is a horrible act of injustice," student government association president Andre Evans, a senior criminal justice and psychology major from Houston, said in a Prairie View news release.

"No one should just sit back and wait for action. Hopefully our presence will serve as a proactive step and message toward gaining justice for these students."

Cynthia Cooper-Dyke, head women's basketball coach and former WNBA player, has committed to partner with the Student Government Association to help organize a celebrity basketball tournament to raise funds for the Jena Six, the school said.