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Johnson Trial - NC man once accused of murder marks end of ordeal

By Marlon A. Walker

GOLDSBORO (AP) - James Johnson's plea Feb. 16 to a felony charge in connection with the death of a 17-year-old Wilson girl marked the end of his legal ordeal surrounding the case.

Johnson entered an Alford plea to a misprision of a felony charge, meaning he does not admit guilt but acknowledges prosecutors may have enough evidence to convict him. No judgment goes on his record.

But he and his family said the battle with the legal system that wrongly jailed him more than three years continues for anyone who may face what's taken him nearly five years to overcome.

"We can't let it end there," said Johnson's father, Arthur Johnson. "If you just say it's over because of Monday, by Tuesday you're right back where you started from."

Brittany Willis, police said, was kidnapped at gunpoint on June 28, 2004, from a shopping center parking lot. Authorities found the 17-year-old's body the next day at a construction site. She had been raped and shot twice.

Then-16-year-old Kenneth Meeks showed up to the Johnson family home the night of Willis' murder in a sport utility vehicle James Johnson said he didn't recognize. From there, the two drove to the construction site where the girl had been killed. Johnson was shown the teen's body.

But after he told authorities of what he'd been told and saw, the finger was pointed back at him. He was jailed more than three years on murder, rape and kidnapping charges in Willis' death.

Meeks eventually was sentenced to life without parole in Willis' death. He later recanted his story to authorities that James Johnson had a part in the slaying, going as far as to write the local paper with the information.

Johnson's charges were eventually dropped in December 2007, but a special prosecutor given the case charged Johnson with accessory after the fact for his role in the incident. The prosecutor claimed Johnson wiped his fingerprints off Willis' vehicle.

"I was tired of the court system," Johnson, now 22, said at a prayer vigil marking the end of his nearly 5-year ordeal. "Even if it was a 99-percent chance I'd get off, that one percent ... scared me. I've already seen (my family) through glass for three-and-a-half years."

He said he intended to fight the charges to the end, but fear of going back to the same place he says he was wrongly held for more than three years pushed him to accept the plea agreement. He had been released in September 2007 when a judge reduced his \$1 million bond.

Johnson was barely an adult when he was jailed on murder charges in July 2004. Now, he says, he plans to use his story to help other teens going down the wrong road.

"Being in jail, I realized some of the traps some of the young brothers fall into," he said. "I want to give them an outlet. I want to open their eyes."

The Rev. William Barber, president of the state chapter of the NAACP, said Feb. 18 more needs to be done to prevent prosecutors from wrongly targeting innocent people.

"The James Johnson case was never a case about the Willises versus James Johnson," Barber said. "The case was about James Johnson

HBCU President Pushed for Health Secretary

By Hazel Edney
NNPA Editor-in-Chief

WASHINGTON (NNPA) - House Majority Whip James E. Clyburn (D-S.C.), the highest ranking black member of Congress, has asked President Barack Obama to consider the public health-oriented president of a historically black university for the post of secretary of Health and Human Services.

Clyburn is pushing New Orleans' native Wayne J. Riley, a specialist in internal medicine, who has been president of Nashville's Meharry Medical College for two years. He says Riley would be ideal for the job, in part because of his consistent focus on the disparate rates of health care coverage, illness, and death in black and other racial minority communities.

"There are currently over 47 million Americans who lack health care coverage, fifty-five percent of whom are minorities," Clyburn says in a statement to the NNPA News Service in response to a request for comment. "As CEO of Meharry Medical College, a Historically Black College in Nashville, Tenn., Dr. Wayne J. Riley is on the front line of the health care crisis in this country. His training, skills and experiences make him uniquely qualified to lead Health and Human Services at this critical time in our nation's history."

Obama this week turned to health care and budgetary items after signing the \$787 billion stimulus bill last week. Though rumor and speculation abounded, early this week Obama had not said who he would pick for the top health post. Kansas Gov. Kathleen Sebelius is reportedly a leading candidate largely because of her attempts to broaden health care coverage. Initially, Obama had selected former South Dakota Sen. Tom Daschle, but he withdrew himself from consideration after the discovery of tax problems.

The U. S. Health and Human Services secretary is the top cabinet post for the oversight of health policies. The successful candidate would be responsible for carrying the ball for Obama's promised new national health care plan. The department also oversees the U. S. surgeon general, often viewed as the chief health advocate.

Racial disparities in health care systems and statistics had become so deep that an Office of Minority Health was established in 1986 "to improve and protect the health of racial and ethnic minority populations through the development of health policies and programs that will eliminate health disparities," according to a description on the agency's website.

Yet, 23 years later, major disparities persist in virtually every health and disease category with African-Americans being the worst amidst Hispanics/Latinos; Pacific Islanders; Asians; American Indians; Alaska and Hawaii Natives.

Riley, Meharry's 10th president, previously served as vice-president and dean for health affairs and governmental relations at Baylor College of Medicine (BCM) in Houston. According to his official biography, he also has a broad range of patient care and administrative experience, including at Baylor's affiliate Ben Taub General Hospital, a 500-bed public hospital that serves the indigent and uninsured of Houston and Harris County, Texas. Riley was assistant chief of medicine at Ben Taub.

Riley supporters say he is uniquely equipped for the job as an African-American physician with extensive experience and study in health policy for the underserved. Some also say Obama's top appointments have

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versus an arrogant system of injustice."

NAACP officials spent Feb. 18 morning telling stories of others who had been convicted in North Carolina. Some, like Alan Gell, had been sentenced to die for crimes they were later found to have not committed. Gell was acquitted in 2004 of a 1995 killing after it was revealed prosecutors had withheld key evidence during his original trial.

A complaint with the State Bar is still in progress against Wilson County assistant district attorney Bill Wolfe, whom the NAACP has accused of prosecutorial misconduct. Barber has said he's hoping the NAACP's national office will assist them in fighting what he sees as injustices in the state's legal system.

"People keep saying 'let's heal' from this experience. For them, that means let's scab over the bigger problem," Barber said. "Until the system is willing to call itself out, it's not over."



GOP CHAIR MICHAEL STEELE GOP's Steele Rejects Obama 'Coat Tailing' Theory; Sets Out to 'Engage' Black Community

By Hazel Trice Edney
NNPA Editor-in-Chief

WASHINGTON (NNPA) - New Republican Party Chairman Michael Steele, the first African-American to hold the seat, rejects the notion that his Jan. 30 win was largely due to political "coat tailing" of the celebrated Barack Obama, America's first black president.

"I firmly believe that if Hillary Clinton had been the [Democratic] nominee and had won or Joe Biden or any of them, I think that it was a moment in time just as it was for Barack in which various things came together to create this moment," Steele said in an interview with the NNPA News Service. "Now we will see what we do with it. Now we'll see what we'll both do with it."

A widely-held belief is that the Republican strategy is now to glean from the Obama euphoria in order to win back defected Republicans and African-American votes in four years.

"While I congratulate Steele, I am also aware that it probably would never have happened if Barack Obama had not won the presidency," wrote NNPA columnist Ron Walters. "So now that he is chair, the biggest question he confronts is how to turn around the strong perception that Republicans are actively opposed to black interests. Steele himself said just after the recent election while campaigning for the office that Republican Party officials "just don't give a damn."

Steele concedes that galvanizing the Republican vote enough to take back the white House in four years will be nearly impossible.

"It will be like climbing Mount Rushmore in a pair of shorts and a T-Shirt. It's going to be very, very, very tough," he said. "You're fully exposed. And it's a very difficult thing to do. You're laid bare in many respects as a party because you're trying to say, 'Look, this is what we've done wrong in the past.'"

But, he actually believes it's doable.

"They didn't have Michael Steele," he said.

Known for his outspokenness, Steele said, "We did a lot of things that led the people to distrust our leadership."

By that, he not only meant violating Republican principles of frugality and fiscal conservatism, but outrightly demonstrating the insensitivity toward black concerns for which the Republican Party has gained a reputation.

"I got in trouble in 2006 when I ran for the Senate because I called out the failure of a Republican administration to appropriately and affectively deal with [Hurricane] Katrina," Steele says. He lost that election despite his earlier win as Maryland's first black lieutenant governor.

Now, he says, he will use his outspokenness to start an energetic conversation within the largely southern white male party that he believes will attract others to the table.

Most blacks were registered Republicans until Franklin D. Roosevelt's "New Deal" from 1933-1938. As late as the early 1960s, it was not unusual for Republican candidates to get 30 percent of the black vote, particularly moderate Republicans such as New York City Mayor John V. Lindsay and Connecticut Sen. Lowell Weicker.

A major turning point for the party and its relationship with African-Americans came when Republicans chose Sen. Barry Goldwater, an arch-conservative from Arizona, as its presidential candidate in 1964, smack in the middle of the civil rights movement. Goldwater ran on a slogan

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DUKE ELLINGTON (Courtesy The Bettman Archive, Inc.)

District Quarter - DC celebrates release of Duke Ellington quarter

By Brett Zongker

WASHINGTON (AP) - Jazz musician Duke Ellington has become the first black American to be prominently featured on a U.S. coin in circulation with the release of a quarter honoring the District of Columbia.

U.S. Mint and D.C. officials celebrated the release of the coin Feb. 24 during a ceremony at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

"Like many great Americans who succeed in what they love doing, Duke Ellington was equal parts talent, hard work, passion and perseverance," U.S. Mint Director Ed Moy said.

Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington was born and raised in Washington. He and other black music legends, such as Ella Fitzgerald, helped establish the city's U Street as an entertainment corridor.

Ellington beat out designs featuring abolitionist Frederick Douglass and astronomer Benjamin Banneker.

Last year, the Mint rejected a proposed design for the D.C. quarter that included the slogan "Taxation Without Representation," a phrase borrowed by D.C. residents to voice objections that they pay federal taxes without full representation in Congress. Instead, the Ellington coin includes the D.C. motto "Justice for All."

The coin with Ellington resting his elbow on a piano was officially released Jan. 26, but officials took time Feb. 24 to hand out some of the "mint condition" quarters to D.C. schoolchildren.

"With Duke on the coin, we are sending an important message to the world that D.C. is a lot more than a government town," D.C. Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton said.

Prior to the Ellington quarter, the only U.S. coin to depict a black person was a 2003 Missouri state coin that featured explorers Lewis and Clark with a black slave named York. Mint spokeswoman Carla Coolman said.

Commemorative coins have also featured black figures but those coins weren't put into circulation.

On the Net:

U.S. Mint: <http://www.usmint.gov>

'Racist' Cartoon: New York Post Endangers President and Community

By Cyril "Josh" Barker

Special to the NNPA from the Amsterdam News

NEW YORK (NNPA) - A political cartoon published by the New York Post on Wednesday, Feb. 18, has many alleging the newspaper promotes blatant racism. The cartoon that ran in the newspaper's "Page Six" section features two white police officers who have gunned down a chimpanzee in a pool of blood.

One of the officers says, "They'll have to find someone else to write the next stimulus bill." Sean Delonas drew the cartoon. The work is a parody of a recent news story that broke earlier in the week where a woman was attacked in Connecticut by a chimpanzee. Police shot and killed the animal that was being kept as pet. President Barack Obama also signed \$787 billion stimulus bill on Tuesday.

The cartoon appeared in the tabloid on Wednesday and prompted immediate opposition from civil rights organizations. At the National Action Network headquarters in Harlem, the Rev. Al Sharpton voiced his outrage. "We cannot have different standards in this country when it comes to offending people," said Sharpton. "This, to us, is something that's offensive to all Americans, black, white, Hispanic and Asian."

In an act of protest, Sharpton led picketing of the offices of the New York Post on Thursday at noon. He's demanded that the paper clarify the meaning of the cartoon and/or discipline the artist and editor responsible. Community leaders and political figures joined him, including Councilmember Charles Barron and Assemblywoman Inez Barron.

"The racist rag sheet [the New York Post] has hit an all-time low," said Councilmember Barron. "The cartoon is racist and threatens the life of our president, Barack Obama. We are calling on the Justice Department to investigate the New York Post. Overall, our community, city and country will not accept this." Sharpton told the AmNews that he is also going to

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