

NATIONAL BRIEFS



Ministers asked to endorse reopening of Williams case

ATLANTA — A lawyer for the only man convicted in a string of slayings of young blacks that terrorized Atlanta two decades ago asked black ministers last Thursday to support a call to reopen the case.

Lynn Whatley, attorney for Wayne B. Williams, asked the Concerned Black Clergy of Atlanta to endorse a petition to Fulton County District Attorney Paul Howard asking for a new investigation into the murders of 29 young blacks between 1979 and 1981.

Whatley also asked the ministers' group, which represents about 100 churches in the Atlanta area, to convene a town meeting for a discussion of unresolved issues in the slayings and the way they were investigated and prosecuted.

Williams was convicted in 1982 of two counts of murder and is serving a life sentence at a state prison in Valdosta.

Two days after the trial, authorities closed the books on 21 other murders of young blacks, many of them children, blaming Williams for those deaths.

A 24th case was closed and blamed on Williams several months later.

L.A. officer shoots homeless woman

LOS ANGELES — Questions are being raised in the shooting death of Margaret Mitchell. The 54-year-old homeless and mentally ill woman was shot to death by bicycle policeman Edward Larrigan, 27. Larrigan, a five-year veteran said he felt his life was threatened when the 5-foot-1 woman thrust a screwdriver at him.

He jumped to avoid her, fell to one knee and fired one shot into her chest, police said. She died at a nearby hospital.

The FBI, the Police Commission and the LAPD are separately investigating the incident which has taken on racial overtones. Mrs. Mitchell was black; Larrigan is Hispanic.

Her son, Richard Mitchell has said that his mother was a college-educated former bank employee whose mental health began deteriorating over the past few years. She heard voices, her son said, but refused help.

Lenny Kravitz collapses at NJ show

HOLMDEL, N.J. — Lenny Kravitz collapsed from heat exhaustion during a weekend concert, a spokesman for the arena said today.

Kravitz, wearing bell bottoms and a long sleeve coat, played for 40 minutes Sunday night, then walked off and collapsed backstage, said Jim Steen, director of marketing for the PNC Bank Arts Center. His band played for another 15 minutes without him before the show was stopped.

Kravitz was treated by the house doctor and left on his own, Steen said. Kravitz, who has been touring with the Black Crowes and Everlast, was the final act in the first concert held at the arts center this season.

— The Associated Press

Spike Lee: Heston comment was joke

NEW YORK — Spike Lee says he was joking when he suggested Charlton Heston should be shot.

The director was quoted in last Saturday's New York Post as telling reporters at the Cannes Film Festival that the National Rifle Association should be disbanded and, of Heston, "Shoot him with a .44 Bulldog."

"I intended it as ironic, as a joke to show how violence begets more violence," Lee said last week. "I told everyone there it was a joke. I said I did not want to read in the papers, 'Shoot Charlton Heston.'"

He said his remarks were in response to a question about whether Hollywood was to blame for the recent rash of school shootings.

Lee said he had no reason to apologize.

Heston, the NRA president, had earlier said the remarks amused him.

"He gave me a big laugh," Heston said last Thursday on the Los Angeles talk radio station KABC-AM. "The statement is a foolish one and it's not worth arguing about. If he wants to come and take a shot at me, go let him try it."



Lee

Officer accused of beating Louima pleads guilty

NEW YORK — The police officer accused of brutally assaulting Abner Louima, a Haitian immigrant, in the bathroom of Brooklyn, New York's 70th precinct station in August 1997 pleaded guilty on May 25 to six charges of civil rights violations.

Justin A. Volpe, 27, could face life in prison and a fine of up to \$1.5 million when sentenced in federal court at a later date.

The officer admitted to the court that he shoved a stick into Louima's rectum, causing severe internal injuries, and then thrust it into his face and threatened to kill him if he reported the attack.

He did not apologize to Louima. His lawyer called the guilty plea a "sufficient apology."

Volpe's guilty plea cut his trial short in its fourth week, but the trial of three other police officers and a sergeant will continue to proceed. The charges against the four include covering up the attack and participating in the beating of Louima. — Katherine Stapp for IPSIGIN

See Briefs on A9

Greensboro ministers talk prison reform

By DAMON FORD
THE CHRONICLE

GREENSBORO — Greensboro ministers are fighting to reform the state's criminal justice system and, more specifically, push for the release of blacks they claim are serving harsher sentences for crimes than others.

The Pulpit Forum, a group of mostly African American clergy from around Greensboro, sponsored the Jubilee 2000 Conference last Saturday.

The day-long conference focused on issues facing North Carolina's justice system and addressed a number of others, including the growth of the prison industry in North Carolina and around the nation, and ways of creating resources to better acclimate prisoners to society after being released.

In conjunction with the host of speakers and workshops, participants were also able to submit names of loved ones they felt were being railroaded by the system and were serving extreme sentences.

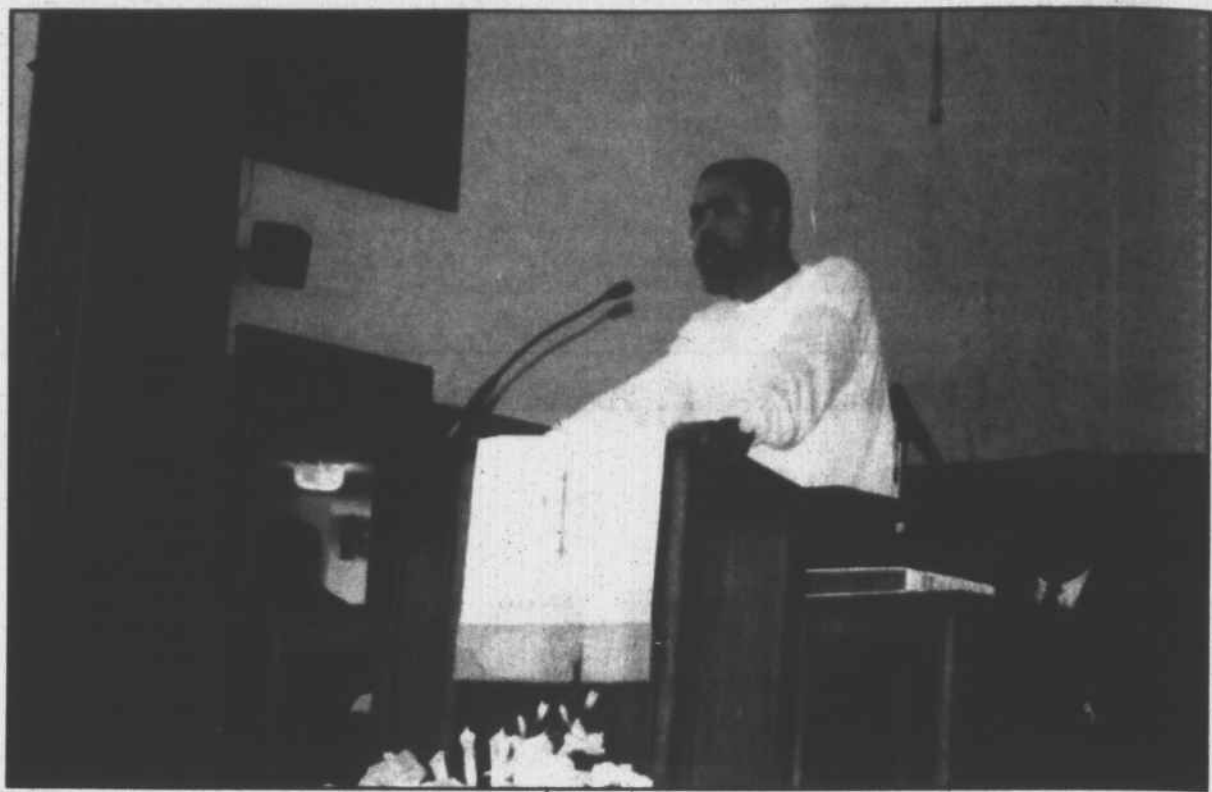
"Why can't we drive out the spirit of imprisonment that is possessing our children," said the Rev. Jerry Taylor during a riveting sermon in the morning session. "We're going to have to pray up a storm around here ... (and) the prison doors are going to swing open."

Pulpit Forum leaders hope blacks who are serving harsh sentences will be freed like Greensboro's Kwame Cannon when these doors are opened. They say inequities in the judicial system have black men serving longer terms than whites even though the offenders committed the same crimes.

"Everybody ought to do the same time," said the Rev. Mazie Ferguson.

Cannon was given two life sentences for six charges of burglary in 1986.

On March 16, the 30-year-old was released after thousands of people, ranging from blue collar workers to state officials, wrote letters to the governor and participated in marches aimed at drawing attention to Cannon's plight.



Kwame Cannon was one of several speakers during a conference on prison reform and equity in sentencing Saturday. Cannon, 30, was given two life sentences for six charges of burglary in the 80s.

Photo by Damon Ford

Hunt finally pardoned Cannon, and on March 31 he walked out of Asheboro Correctional Facility a free man.

Cannon, who spoke during the conference, thanked the people who worked to gain his freedom.

"For me it's been beautiful," he said. Though the transition to getting used to the new world around him is difficult, he said, his most difficult task lies within himself; to stay grounded.

He also spoke about the dreams of those incarcerated.

"A lot of people hope for different things... The inmate hopes for the little things — that he can talk to his family without being guarded, that he can choose his own clothes," Cannon said.

He also pleaded to those in the audience to continue to fight the imbalance in the judicial system that has black men serving longer sentences for crimes.

"If you don't choose to use these rights, you are, in fact, condoning what is going on," he said.

N.C. Sen. William Martin

said that since the first hurdle has been crossed with Cannon's release, people all around the state must continue to push forward with the effort to get others freed.

One of the methods he mentioned in getting this done was the use of law students from universities across the state to examine cases and present arguments for releasing those who have been levied harsh sentences or others who shouldn't even be behind bars.

Martin has talked with Gov. Hunt about the program and several others, but Martin adds that everyone one must work together.

"I think there is hope," he said. "It's going to be important we pull together our best resources."

Pulpit Forum members also said they would like to see government-sponsored programs set up to help prisoners make the transition back into society.

While the work is still being done to get government officials to move on legislation, Ferguson

believes churches can begin doing something by opening their doors and not judging former prisoners for their past deeds.

"When a guy finishes his time he shouldn't be stigmatized," she said. "He should be helped to get a decent house, a job..."

But she believes most of this help should begin before they get out.

"We must visit the prisoners," Ferguson said. "It means more than carrying a Bible and hymn book over there and beating it over their heads."

Instead, she says, church members should establish lasting friendships with the prisoners so that once their time is up they have someone to look to for help and guidance.

That same care and concern have made Cannon's transition, though hard, a lot easier compared to others who come back into mainstream society, Ferguson said.

"What is being done for Kwame I want to see done for everyone coming out of prison," she said.

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INDEX

OPINION	A6
SPORTS	B1
RELIGION	B6
CLASSIFIEDS	B9
HEALTH	C2
ENTER.	C5
CALENDAR	C7

This Week In Black History...

June 3, 1946 — In *Morgan v. Commonwealth of Virginia*, the U.S. Supreme Court bars segregation in interstate bus travel.

June 8, 1982 — Legendary Negro League pitcher Leroy "Satchel" Paige dies. The first African American to pitch in the American League, Paige is heralded as one of the greatest black baseball players.