

Region adds a voice to Jena protests

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*SHARON GEKOSKI-KIMMEL / Inquirer Staff Photographer
His arm raised, James Evans of Bristol was among the
throng that marched across the Lower Trenton Bridge
today.*

Today's rallies in Philadelphia and across the nation supporting six African American teenagers in Louisiana evoked strong emotions of unresolved racial injustices, past and present.

"My mother actually moved us north to get us away from the racism in the South," said Mildred Frink, 41, of Willingboro, who was among about 250 demonstrators, clad mostly in black, who spanned the Lower Trenton Bridge in support of the "Jena Six," as they have been called.

For marchers such as Frink, a Mississippi native, the case in Jena, La., touches a nerve about the perception of unequal justice for blacks and whites.

While the mainstream media have been largely silent about the year-old charges against the teens - who were initially charged with attempted murder in the severe beating of a white classmate during a time of racial tensions in Jena - the case has received considerable attention in the African American media.

"At black colleges and in the black media, they've been talking about this for months," said Nathaniel Norment Jr., chairman of African American studies at Temple University, where about 700 people, mostly students, rallied today in support of the Jena Six.

The merits of the case - whether local prosecutors were unjust in seeking to have the six black teens tried as adults on serious felony charges - are still being decided in Louisiana's courts. But the case and what surrounded it have become a national issue largely because of the use of one of the most provocative symbols of the Old South - a hangman's noose - that was tied to a tree at Jena's high school.

The appearance of three nooses last September set off a series of racially tinged events that culminated in December, with six black students jumping a white student.

"Some people may see it as a prank, but the people who hung the noose, they know what it meant," said Norment. For African Americans, he said, the noose sparks strong resentment about a justice system that they believe is historically biased.

While national civil-rights leaders traveled to the small Louisiana town to lead a rally of thousands today, smaller demonstrations were held on campuses and in cities across the country.

The protests were organized through a nationwide campaign largely conducted on the Internet, through cell-phone text messages, and on urban radio stations.

"The case is important because it highlights the racist double standards in the criminal-justice system that have existed for a long time," said Kali Nicole Gross, director of African studies at Drexel University. "It's easy for whites to dismiss the concerns as overblown. Then something like this comes along and we think, 'We aren't just imagining this.' "

In the Jena Six, veteran civil-rights activists appeared to have found an issue that bridges generations.

"The small town of Jena has been thrust into the national spotlight, reminding the entire world of the deplorable days when African Americans had limited civil rights and were subjected to random acts of violence without provocation," Trenton Mayor Douglas H. Palmer said in a statement today.

At the rally at Temple University's Bell Tower, activists lauded the turnout of young people who had not demonstrated much previous interest in political issues.

"I am just so proud of all of the young people, black, white, brown and yellow, who have come to this Bell Tower," said J. Whyatt Mondesire, president of the Philadelphia chapter of the NAACP.

Unlike in the 1960s, when demonstrations were regarded as a threat and met with force, today's protesters appeared to be warmly welcomed by the institutions where they rallied.

"One of the initiatives on campus is civic engagement, and this just embodies that spirit," said Tim Kelly, spokesman for Richard Stockton College in Pomona, N.J., where 120 students rallied today. "From my generation, we hear that young people aren't politically active. This shows that it isn't true."

Gross, the Drexel professor, also expressed surprise at the demonstrators' ability to organize themselves using electronic messaging, a method that may have escaped the notice of the older generation.

"I'm excited about the involvement of young people," she said. "Sometimes people complain that young people aren't involved, but it may be they're expressing themselves in ways that we're unaware of."

Courtney Anderson, a member of Temple's Black Student Union, said she hoped the rally would develop into a larger movement. "I think we achieved our goal of raising awareness today," she told the rally. "But I want you to go home and tell people about the things you heard here, because this is not just our history, it's American history."

But Norment, the Temple professor who was an undergraduate in the early 1960s, took a seasoned long view and wondered whether the public concerns would be easily distracted by fleeting events such as O.J. Simpson's recent arrest.

"The whole thing with O.J. in the last three days got more coverage than the Jena story did in the last year," Norment said.

Several marchers said they were transplanted Southerners, reminded of personal injustices suffered in their own youths.

Andrew Bobbitt, 43, who was among protesters on the "Trenton Makes" bridge that links New Jersey's capital to Morrisville, Bucks County, said the news coming out of Jena reminded him of his own struggles.

His family left a small North Carolina town when he was 5, he said, after the Ku Klux Klan threatened his aunt for fighting with a white woman. His family settled in Trenton, only to encounter race riots shortly after arriving.

"Even as a kid in Trenton," he said, "I couldn't walk in certain parts of town."

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