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Beating case felt in N.O., beyond Family of 'Jena Six' stumps for cause

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The case of the "Jena Six" came to New Orleans this weekend.

Relatives of the six African-American teenagers charged in the alleged beating of a white schoolmate late last year have been spending the weekend in New Orleans, speaking at fundraisers and forums Friday and Saturday and at two local churches today before heading back to Jena, a small central Louisiana town.

Five of the six youths originally were charged with attempted second-degree murder and conspiracy to commit that crime, carrying sentences of up to 80 years in prison upon conviction. Charges against the sixth were not made public because he was a juvenile.

The case has gained nationwide attention, with many people saying the charges were unfairly harsh.

The charges against some of the students were later reduced to aggravated second-degree battery and conspiracy to commit that crime, but those still carry possible sentences of more than 22 years upon conviction.

This weekend's visit to New Orleans was sponsored by more than two dozen local groups. Local support for the six accused teenagers began to swell in the spring, when New Orleans activists and the local chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union began making regular four-hour car trips to Jena.

"One of the things that Dr. (Martin Luther) King taught us is that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," said the Rev. Norwood Thompson, head of the Southern Christian Leadership Council in New Orleans. Thompson's church, Evening Star Baptist Church, will host the teens' family members this afternoon.

At the end of June, ACLU staff member Tory Pegram and two other New Orleanians drove to Jena to observe the trial of Mychal Bell, 17, a high school football star who was weighing a number of college scholarship offers before his arrest. Bell, the first of the six teenagers to be tried, was convicted by an all-white six-member jury.

Audrey Stewart, one of the New Orleans observers, said she knew the situation wasn't good as she observed the courtroom, where the judge, district attorney and witnesses all were white and the defendant and his supporters were black. "Even with that, I thought the jury might not convict," she said. At every step in the legal process, she said, "We thought, 'It can't really happen.' And then it would."

Bell's sentencing date is Sept. 20.

"We will never give up," said Catrina Wallace, one of the family members in New Orleans for the weekend.

Wallace is the secretary of the LaSalle Parish chapter of the NAACP, which she helped to form after the December arrests. She's also the stepsister of one of the defendants, Robert Bailey Jr., who was beaten by a group of white students not long before his arrest. One student was charged with simple battery, a misdemeanor, in that case.

Months of tension

The black students and their families said the alleged attack on the white student was really a lunchtime fight that came after three months of race-related incidents. They said the tensions began last September after white students hung nooses on a tree in the yard of Jena High School and were given short suspensions.

Since the arrests in December, protest meetings in Jena have drawn as many as 150 people, activists said. A march in July drew 300, many from New Orleans.

Because of widespread publicity about the case, some of the six now have well-seasoned, pro bono legal counsel.

In June, it took the jury less than three hours to convict Bell. He was represented in court by a public defender who didn't challenge the jury's composition and called no witnesses.

Because a simple battery charge can be increased to aggravated battery only if an assailant uses a "dangerous weapon," District Attorney Reed Walters argued, successfully, that the tennis shoes of the teenagers who kicked the victim were such weapons.

Last week, the judge in the case, J.P. Mauffray, threw out Bell's conspiracy conviction. Bell now faces a maximum of 15 years in prison.

New Orleans activists said they hope to take busloads of people to Jena for Bell's sentencing. Thompson said national figures such as the Rev. Jesse Jackson, the Rev. Al Sharpton, Julian Bond, actor Steve Harvey and radio host Tom Joyner are expected to be there as well.

Jackson will be in Jena today and said Saturday he hopes to talk with both white and black ministers, parents and students about bringing the town's people together.

Town wary of attention

Some within the town of 3,000 are not thrilled by the prospect of more visitors. Jeanette Pritchard, a school bus driver who also works at the Jena Service Center, a local gas station, said by telephone that the news coverage upsets some townspeople. "People don't want CNN and all them here," she said.

Pritchard said she has driven both white and black students and has never had a problem. Some outsiders paint Jena, which is 85 percent white and 15 percent black, as a racist place, she said. "But it's not. No, no, no. It's not."

Life in Jena continues much as it always has, Pritchard said. "Everybody still has their same friends, black and white," she said.

The Jena Six cause has gathered support mostly from "out-of-town people," she said.

Outside help may be necessary, said Gwendolyn Iles-Foster, a longtime civil-rights activist who

lives in Alexandria, 35 miles from Jena. In rural areas and small towns such as Jena, hit hard by declines in farming, limited employment options can curtail activism, she said.

"There are so few jobs in central Louisiana and so those with good jobs are afraid to speak," she said. "So any help that's going to come has to come from the outside."

Wallace said any help is welcome. "We don't consider anyone an outsider," she said.

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Family members of the accused teenagers will speak today at 12:30 p.m. at Ebenezer Missionary Baptist Church, 2415 S. Claiborne Ave., and at 3 p.m. at Evening Star Baptist Church, 8926 Hickory St. More information can be found at www.freethejena6.org.

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