

# Stayed Texas execution personal for Finch family

By Brandy Edwards

Special to Sentinel-Voice

DALLAS (NNPA)—Melanie Belt, a medical doctor in New York, has a firm stance on the death penalty.

Her opinion is based on personal experience. Two men repeatedly stabbed her grandparents, Fred and Mildred Finch, to death. One was scheduled to die by lethal injection.

"You think you are opposed to the death penalty until something like this happens," said Belt, 29. "It is not until you drive over to your grandparents' home, knock on the door waiting for your grandmother and then you find them...murdered."

Kenneth Wayne Thomas and his brother, Lonnie Thomas, broke into the elderly Finchs' Rose Lane home in South Dallas on March 17, 1986.

"I know I was young, but I was at an age where I could remember every detail, and after seeing such a serious crime, this man who did this to me, my family and the community, needs to be punished," said Belt.

Thomas was scheduled to be executed June 18. The Texas Court of Criminal Appeals stayed the execution last week and remanded the case to Dallas. The Court said a Dallas court needs to decide if Thomas, now 42, was mentally retarded when he sexually assaulted Fred Finch and stabbed him at least 25 times and stabbed Mildred Finch more than 80 times. Thomas' death sentence was the first in Dallas County in a Black-on-Black crime.

The U.S. Supreme Court banned executions of the mentally retarded in 2002 in "Atkins v. Virginia", citing the diminished moral culpability of such an inmate. With that ruling, the court said the mentally retarded cannot be sentenced to death because it would violate the Eighth Amendment against cruel and unusual punishment.

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The Dallas native attended Booker T. Washington High School and Wiley College in Marshall. From the mid 1950s to the 1960s, he fought for school desegregation and civil rights cases in Dallas.

Mildred Finch, 64, taught mathematics at El Centro Community College and at Madison and Pinkston high schools.

The Finchs' daughter, Mollie Belt, her husband James C. Belt Jr., and her children, James III and Melanie, found the bodies.

People are generally considered to have mental retardation if their IQ is below 70 and if they have significant limitations in adaptive functioning in such areas as communication, self care, social/interpersonal skills, home living, self-direction or academic background. During Thomas' trial, defense attorneys presented evidence that he was born with brain damage and that his IQ is between 70 and 75.

Dallas attorney Lydia Brandt wrote in her appeal to the court, "Credible evidence exists that Mr. Thomas is mentally retarded.

"The evidence shows that: his IQ measures at 70 or below; he has significant limitation in his adaptive functioning and he exhibited these diagnostic features before the

age of 18," she said.

Brandt argued to the Dallas court last Thursday that a psychologist from Rhode Island examined Thomas' records earlier this month and found a history of mental impairment. If Thomas were found to be mentally retarded, then his sentence would automatically become life in prison.

Thomas, who lived about four blocks from the Finchs on Electra Street, boasted about the murders, claiming, "Dead folks don't talk," and "I ain't through yet."

He was seen wearing new shirts and suits bearing the monogram F.F. and a Rolex watch. Thomas told authorities he received the clothes after helping a woman move into her home.

In 1987, after being convicted of two capital murders and a one-hour jury deliberation, Thomas was sentenced to death by lethal injection. After years of appeal, the execution date was set for June 18.

Thomas was tried first in Fred Finch's death. He was convicted but the sentence came under fire when it was learned that a juror in the case had a felony conviction and was ineligible to serve.

Prosecutors then tried Thomas for the death of Mildred Finch.

The state appeals court eventually reversed Thomas' capital murder conviction in the killing of Fred Finch, but in 1994 affirmed the conviction for the burglary and slaying of

Mildred Finch. Lonnie Thomas was sentenced to life in prison.

"I want him to have every benefit the law has to offer," said James Belt Jr., a Dallas attorney. "After that, I want to see him executed. He failed in all his [previous appeals] and now he is trying to hang his hat on this new law.

"I disagree with the stay, especially after it being so many years in the past, but I believe he will meet justice," he added. "Thomas had a fair trial and a good lawyer, but now I want to be there to see him receive the death penalty all over again."

Mollie Belt, who is finishing her father's dream to maintain a Black-oriented newspaper, said she too had to reassess her opinion on capital punishment.

"I can remember writing about capital punishment while I was in college studying sociology and psychology. I was against it. But, my father said even then that there were some crimes that deserved the death penalty. Of course after this incident, it makes you think twice," said Mollie Belt, Dallas Examiner publisher.

"If in fact he is mentally retarded, then it is dangerous because it is clear that we don't have proper services for people with mental conditions," she said. "Our communities are not safe."

Melanie Belt said Thomas has been in the system long enough.

"In regards to the stay that Thomas acquired, I disagree because if you commit a crime to this magnitude, you need to be punished," Melanie Belt said. "It is my hope that he is executed, I don't think we should entertain his plea, but we have to according to law. I think his family is hurting, but we all need to keep in mind that he killed two people, what if it happened to his family, what would they want?"

The Finchs had a great impact on the Dallas community and in intellectual circles.

(See Finch, Page 14)

## Rate of black children in extreme poverty hits record high

By Nisa Islam Muhammad  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

WASHINGTON (NNPA)—At age seven, Jason Tyler knew something was different about his life. His friends wore new tennis shoes and clothes to school. His came from the thrift store. They talked about having games and toys he was scared to even ask his mother about. He knew her answer would be the same whenever he asked for something: "Boy, I hardly have money to feed you much less buy you something."

What Jason didn't know was that he, his two sisters and brother are among the growing numbers of extremely poor Black children, which is at its highest level in 23 years, according to the Children's Defense Fund (CDF).

Nearly one million Black children in 2001 lived in a family with an annual income of less than half the federal

poverty level (disposable income below \$7,064 for a family of three, including food and housing benefits), the CDF says. Its president, Marian Wright Edelman, explained that these numbers are clear indicators that, as a country, we must invest in children now instead of passing irresponsible tax breaks for the rich.

"It is shameful that one million Black children are left behind in extreme poverty," said Edelman. "It is hard to be poor. It is harder to be an extremely poor Black child in America when our president, who says we should 'Leave No Child Behind,' is proposing massive new tax breaks for the richest Americans." Keshia Watson doesn't really understand or care about tax cuts. What she does know is that she doesn't have enough money to take care of her children.

"I had a job but I got laid off. Now I just work part-

time and it's real hard. I can't afford day care for my 2-year-old. I can't find a job and it's getting harder and harder to make it," she told The Final Call.

Her situation is further complicated by the Bush Administration's plans to dismantle Head Start and block-grant Medicaid, as well as the Children's Health Insurance Program.

Bush also wants to slash and/or freeze crucial services designed to help these poorest children. While research shows that overall poverty has declined among Black children, it fails to highlight the plight or the record-breaking increase of children living in "extreme" poverty.

"Poverty adds an additional hurdle for these students to overcome in reaching educational success. Being poor is one thing but being extremely poor makes success increasingly difficult. Something as simple and in-

expensive as school supplies becomes an issue. They may come at the beginning of the year but they dwindle as the year progresses," says Valerie Butler, who teaches school in Houston.

"No one wants to be stigmatized as being poor so these children try to compensate for what they lack. They still want the same things that other teens want but it's just harder for them to get it. They may be poor, but any money they get is used for the things that will normalize their life like Nike tennis shoes and the latest music CDs."

CDF's analysis further shows that safety nets for the worst-off families, such as government assistance, are being eroded by government policies, which cause fewer extremely poor children of all races to receive cash and in-kind assistance that could help.

The Bush Administration claims its plan to dismantle,

eliminate, cut and freeze essential services for children to pay for massive new tax cuts that opponents claim are for the wealthiest Americans will spur the economy.

The most recent Economic Report of the President, which the President's own Council of Economic Advisers issued in February 2003, explicitly acknowledges that tax cuts are unlikely to pay

for themselves—let alone pay for investments in children and working families.

"I don't know if tax cuts are the answer, but I do know that if we can go across the globe to liberate Iraq, something needs to be done to liberate me and my children from this poverty," Watson said.

Nisa Islam Muhammad writes for The Final Call.

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