Jackson disputes report on Obama comment

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) - Jesse Jackson was quoted as saying Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama was "acting like he's White" for not speaking out more forcefully about a racially charged schoolyard beating in Louisiana.

The *State* newspaper said Jackson made the comment about Obama and the Jena, La., case after speaking at Benedict College, a historically Black school.

"If I were a candidate, I'd be all over Jena," Jackson said in his remarks after the speech, according to the published account.

"Jena is a defining moment, just like Selma was a defining moment," Jackson said. In 1965, demonstrators were attacked by police with billy clubs during a peaceful voting rights march in Selma, Ala., "Bloody Sunday" shocked the nation and helped bring attention to the voting barriers that kept Blacks from the polls.

Jackson later told the newspaper he did not remember making the "acting like he's White" comment about Obama, who is Black.

The civil rights activist said in a recent statement that he was "taken out of context." It said he commended Obama "for speaking out and demanding fairness on this defining issue. Any attempt to dilute my support for Sen. Obama will not succeed."

The newspaper's deputy managing editor, Steve Brook, said the newspaper was standing by its story.

The Illinois senator, in a statement reacting to Jackson's comment, said "outrage over an injustice," such as in the Jena case "isn't a matter of Black and White. It's a matter of right and wrong."

Obama cited earlier statements in which he "demanded fairness" and said they "were carefully thought out with input and support" from one of his national campaign chairmen — Jesse Jackson Jr., a Chicago congressman and son of the elder Jackson.

Obama issued a statement last Friday, after a state appeals court threw out the only remaining conviction against one of the Black teenagers accused in the December attack on a White schoolmate in Jena.

Obama said he hoped the decision would lead the prosecutor "to reconsider the excessive charges brought against all the teenagers in this case. And I hope that the judicial process will move deliberately to ensure that all of the defendants will receive a fair trial and equal justice under the law."

On Sept. 10, the senator said: "When nooses are being hung in high schools in the 21st century, it's a tragedy. It shows that we still have a lot of work to do as a nation to heal our racial tensions. This isn't just Jena's problem; it's America's problem."

Jena is a mostly White town where racial animosity flared about a year ago when a Black student sat under a tree that was a traditional gathering place for Whites. A day later, three nooses were found hanging from the tree. Reports followed of racial fights at the school, culminating in the December attack.

Little Rock

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Carlotta Walls Lanier, left, Gloria Ray Karlmark, Terrence Roberts and Melba Pattillo Beals, far right, four of the Little Rock Nine who helped desegregate Little Rock Central High School in 1957, chat before a reception at the Governors Mansion on Sunday.

shown little regard for the challenges students of color face daily like overcrowded classrooms, under funded schools, crumbling school buildings and textbook shortages.

Meanwhile, in Jena, La., six Black teenagers find themselves in dire legal straits after an interracial dispute about a "White tree" erupted into a series of school fights — in the year 2007.

Even in schools where Blacks and Whites study in the same classrooms and eat in the same cafeteria, there is still much that has to be overcome like separate prom dances, segregated graduation ceremonies and battles over "campus turf."

Many of those who marched, protested, bled and died before, during and after the historic Civil Rights Movement understood that integration was never the ultimate goal of the struggle; desegregation was used as a strategy for children of color to gain access to better educational opportunities.

Earlier this year, Minnijean Brown-Trickey reflected on those historic times and what it meant to her to enter the previously segregated school.

"I just thought, 'It's a big school. It's in my neighborhood. It's there. I should go,'" she said in a March telephone news interview.

Although the students were initially turned back by Arkansas Gov. Orval Faubus, state troopers and more than 1,000 angry Whites, the nine teens were ultimately successful in desegregating the school after President Dwight Eisenhower dispatched members of the U.S. Army's 101st Airborne Division to escort the nine students into the building.

"We all felt good. We knew that Central High had so many more courses, and dramatics and speech and tennis courts and a big, beautiful stadium," Brown-Trickey said.

Five decades later, there is still a great deal we can learn from the paths they chose and the methods and strategies they used to overcome the obstacles they faced.

These children of the struggle and their parents obviously understood and appreciated the importance of education to transform lives, communities and the course of U.S. history.

Ultimately, the sobering lesson to be learned, as we pause to reflect on the 50th anniversary of the Little Rock Nine, is that the struggle to achieve equal protection under the law for students of color is far from over and will not be won overnight. Nor will it be won without additional organizing, intercultural exchanges and sacrifices.

The Children Lead Us

While the Little Rock Nine carried out their mission as brave young soldiers in Arkansas, other Black youths were making similar sacrifices in cities across the Deep South.

In New Orleans, there was 6-year-old Ruby Bridges, the little girl whose bravery and wisdom captured the imagination of the entire country and inspired a Disney film about her experiences at William Frantz Elementary School.

In "The Moral Life of Children," she told author Robert Coles: "I knew I was just Ruby, just Ruby trying to go to school. ...But I guess I also knew I was the Ruby who had to do it — go into that school and stay there, no matter what those people said, standing outside."

Similarly, 9-year-old Betty Ann Kilby stood up for all Black children in Warren County, Va. Sixteen-year-old Ruth Carter and her six younger siblings — Larry, Gloria, Stanley, Pearl, Beverly and Deborah — showed great courage in Sunflower County, Miss., when they integrated several schools in that area in 1965.

In Greensboro, North Carolina, Josephine stood on the front line during what some have described as the Second Civil War.

"Black parents understood that they were putting their children's welfare on the line in the struggle for Black freedom in general and school desegregation in particular," Peter Wallenstein wrote in an article titled "Youngest Combatants of the Second Civil War: Black Children on the Front Lines of Public School Desegregation" in the Summer 2004 issue of the Newsletter of the Society for the History of Children and Youth.

"As Josephine Boyd expressed it, nearly four decades after the events (in Greensboro, N.C.) she participated in as a teenager: 'Those parents, willing to put their children on the firing lines, and those children willing to go to war, were fighting to fulfill their ancestors' as well as their own quest for freedom, identity, and self-respect.'"

Wallenstein further wrote, "And she spoke especially of the roles the children played: 'Desegregation of public schools was a direct confrontation between Black and White children. Black children who sought to desegregate schools demonstrated a strength and a stubbornness to undertake risks that others could not or would not undertake.' Josephine Boyd called herself a 'mandatory volunteer.'"

Regardless of skin color, gender, age, religion, or income, members of American society owe the Little Rock Nine — and all the other young people who put their lives and safety on the line — a great debt.

At the very least, it is vital to learn their stories and pass them on to children and grandchildren.

Movement Backwards

Fifty years after the Little Rock Nine made history, there are still many obstacles for school systems across the U.S. to overcome.

Just three months before the nation commemorated the 50th anniversary of the Little Rock Nine's courageous stand against school segregation, the U.S. Supreme Court showed how far the federal government has moved away from ensuring equal law for all Americans with a 5-4 vote that limited the use of race by public school districts in determining which schools students can attend.

While some saw this as a move toward a colorblind society, others clearly perceived it as the high court's refusal to use its power fully to force school systems to ensure that every child gets a decent education regardless of race.

"Before Brown, school children were told where they could and could not go to school based on the color of their skin," Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr. wrote for a plurality that included conservative Justices Antonin Scalia, Clarence Thomas and Samuel A. Alito Jr.

"The school districts in these cases have not carried the heavy burden of demonstrating that we should allow this once again — even for very different reasons," Roberts wrote, adding, "The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race."

The court's four liberals fired back with a scathing dissent that was twice as long as Justice Roberts' opinion.

Justice Stephen G. Breyer called the controversial decision one that "the court and the nation will come to regret..."

Breyer wrote, "The lesson of history is not that efforts to continue racial segregation are constitutionally indistinguishable from efforts to achieve racial integration."

A recent report by the Civil Rights Project at UCLA suggests that a resegregation of U.S. schools was already underway before the controversial high court decision.

"Nearly two decades into the resegregation, its earlier decisions helped create, the South is losing its huge gains in race relations in the Civil Rights Era," Civil Rights Project co-director Gary Orfield said.

"The country is likely to become even more separate — shutting out rapidly growing Latino and Black populations from the strong schools and interracial experience they and our communities need if we are to be an economically and socially successful society. This goal is so important that educators and community leaders must find ways to support integrated schools in spite of the new limits."

While acknowledging that the trend of resegregation preceded this summer's high court decision, Orfield still called the decision a "historic blunder ignoring much more powerful evidence than what was before the court at the time of Brown v. Board of Education, and sending the country back on a path that failed in thousands of communities embracing 'separate but equal' for six decades before Brown."

Edmund W. Lewis writes for the Louisiana Weekly.