

Palmdale case draws comparisons to Jena Six

By Gene C. Johnson Jr.
Special to Sentinel-Voice

PALMDALE, Calif. (NNPA) - Civil rights activists have begun to descend on this Antelope Valley desert community, following what they believe was a White security guard's unwarranted attack on an African-American girl here last month during a videotaped struggle in a high school cafeteria.

On Sept. 18, 16-year-old Pleajhai Mervin dropped pieces of a birthday cake in a dining area on the campus of Pete Knight High School. According to her mother, LaTrisha Majors, Mervin's failure to clean up the mess to the satisfaction of security guard Chris Niemeyer resulted in a physical attack in which the girl's wrist was fractured.

The struggle between Niemeyer and Mervin was recorded by 14-year-old Joshua Lockett, who also wrestled with the guard after refusing to hand over his camera.

Lockett's 16-year-old sister, Kennigela, also tried to step in.

All three students were booked on suspicion of bat-

tery and suspended. Majors was arrested on identical charges, for allegedly attacking the school's principal, a vice-principal and a security guard, according to the Los Angeles County District Attorney's office.

No charges have been filed in the cases against Mervin and Kennigela Lockett, which are still under review.

Joshua Lockett is scheduled to appear in Lancaster Juvenile Court next month on charges connected to both the Sept. 18 incident and an unrelated petty theft and burglary case.

"It is the kind of miscarriage of justice that we're marching about in Jena [La.]," said Rev. Al Sharpton during a news conference in Los Angeles this month, drawing comparisons to a highly-charged Louisiana incident in which Black students involved in a fight with White classmates were charged and tried as adults.

"Palmdale is certainly a place of concern and an example of Jena in California," said Sharpton, who will ask the U.S. Department of Justice to probe the matter,

"where young Black students are treated differently than others in the criminal justice system."

Last week, authorities cleared Niemeyer of wrongdoing.

But activists, who held an Oct. 10 rally at the Antelope Valley Courthouse demanding that he be fired, described the security guard as a 6-foot-5-inch, 300-pound man with a history of violence toward students.

About 100 people attended the rally, which was led by Sharpton, L.A.-based activist Najee Ali and Southern Christian Leadership Conference President Charles Steele Jr. A larger demonstration is planned for Nov. 19, the day Majors is scheduled to appear in court.

"I want to make sure that this never happens to another child again," Majors said. "My daughter didn't deserve this."

While the case has begun to draw increased national attention, not everyone in Palmdale is happy about the tactics activists have used to publicize and address it.

In an unsigned Oct. 12

open letter addressed to Ali, Sharpton, Steele and Rev. Jesse Jackson, Palmdale city officials declare that the community does "not appreciate your inserting yourself into our community to 'solve' our problems when you do not have a full understanding of our community and the relationships and partnerships we have formed over the years.

"We represent numerous community and business organizations, and we believe that by working together we can resolve this issue locally. Outside interference would derail these efforts, and we respectfully request that you cancel your plans and refrain from coming here for another protest or rally."

The sentiment of the letter, which a city spokeswoman said was crafted with input by a wide variety of Palmdale leaders, is shared by Compton native Darren Parker, president and chairman of the Antelope Valley Human Relations Task Force.

"I don't think it's right for the SCLC or any other group to say, 'I'm coming to your

city regardless of what you say' — without the support of the people who live there," said Parker, an Antelope Valley resident for 20 years.

"That, in itself, creates a controversy within the city. So if you're going to implement something and you're coming from an outside community, I think it would serve you better if you're going to include the leadership that had to live here when you left. In that regard, this incident, I think, is blown out of proportion."

The matter, said Parker, is not one of race but rather of excessive force by the security guard.

"And those things will be addressed and should be addressed," he insisted.

"It is not a racial issue ... We've done an extreme amount of investigation regarding the incident, whether it was race-based, whether there was a hate incident perpetrated during the incident. I think everyone enjoys the fact that they have support. But sometimes it appears that some of the people that we see are more opportunists than people who are looking

to sustain a change here for the long term."

Parker said similar incidents inspired the formation of the task force he now heads, which is in its tenth year of existence.

"You have a very large collection of African-American religious leaders and pastors and ministers here, as well as several elected officials and community leaders that deal with what's going on here in the Antelope Valley — and have been doing that in the last ten years," he said.

Ali, who called the letter "a big joke to me," insisted that activists from outside Palmdale have support in the community for the work they are doing.

"Anytime you have the family and mothers of the victims, as well as the majority of the Black community, wanting to have outside civil rights leaders come in and expose the blatant brutality and racism," he said, "we're doing a job they wanted us to do."

Gene C. Johnson Jr. writes for the WAVE newspapers.

Racism

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However, the school's claim to national fame — a basketball program that leads the country in all-time wins — didn't sign its first Black player until 1969, 20 years after the first Black graduate student enrolled.

The lag in integrating the basketball team is largely responsible for the school's poor image in race relations, said Provost Kumble Subbaswamy, a native of India who is the highest-ranking minority official in the university's history.

"It was a visible sign of old values and bad values,"

said Subbaswamy, who said the school is looking to fill a newly created position of vice president for diversity.

But the image problem is about more than basketball, and it's far more current, said Rev. Louis Coleman, director of the Justice Resource Center in Louisville.

In the fall of 2005, the school experienced a 40 percent drop in Black freshmen. That drew criticism from Black state legislators and some Black faculty members.

Enrollment is back up, but there is currently only one minority dean — Indian, not

Black — and no Black head coaches now that basketball coach Tubby Smith departed for Minnesota.

Editors at the *Kernel* have apologized for the cartoon, which they said was intended as satire. But Coleman blames the university for creating the culture. "The environment was conducive for a satire like this to be printed, to be drawn," Coleman said. "This is not overnight. This has been happening for a long time."

But Everett McCorvey, the university's director of opera says the campus problems now are nothing com-

pared to the 1950s and 1960s in Alabama, where he grew up, and he views the cartoon and vandalism threat as isolated.

"At any university, you're going to have the opportunity for public discourse, and you're going to have these sort of incidents happen," McCorvey said.

"Do I fear it's part of a larger problem? No, I don't."

Jonathan Best, a senior sociology major who is vice president of the school's Black student union, says the advances the school has made in race relations are "mainly cosmetic."

"It appears we're more concerned with getting numbers, not maintaining them, not turning them into professionals," Best said.

Subbaswamy acknowl-

edged that universities need to include minorities as part of the culture, not just the student body.

"Legalized discrimination went away during the civil rights legislation in the 1960s," Subbaswamy said.

"What we're dealing with in society today is subtler. Call it racism or discrimination, but that's much harder to root out."

Comment

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In a letter to the Justice Department, sent Friday, Obama called Tanner's remarks a disgrace and asked Acting Attorney General Peter D. Keisler to dismiss him.

"Such comments are patently erroneous, offensive and dangerous, and they are especially troubling coming from the federal official charged with protecting voting rights in this country," Obama wrote.

Ablin said the Justice Department "continues to have full confidence" in Tanner, effectively rejecting Obama's demand that the voting chief be dismissed.

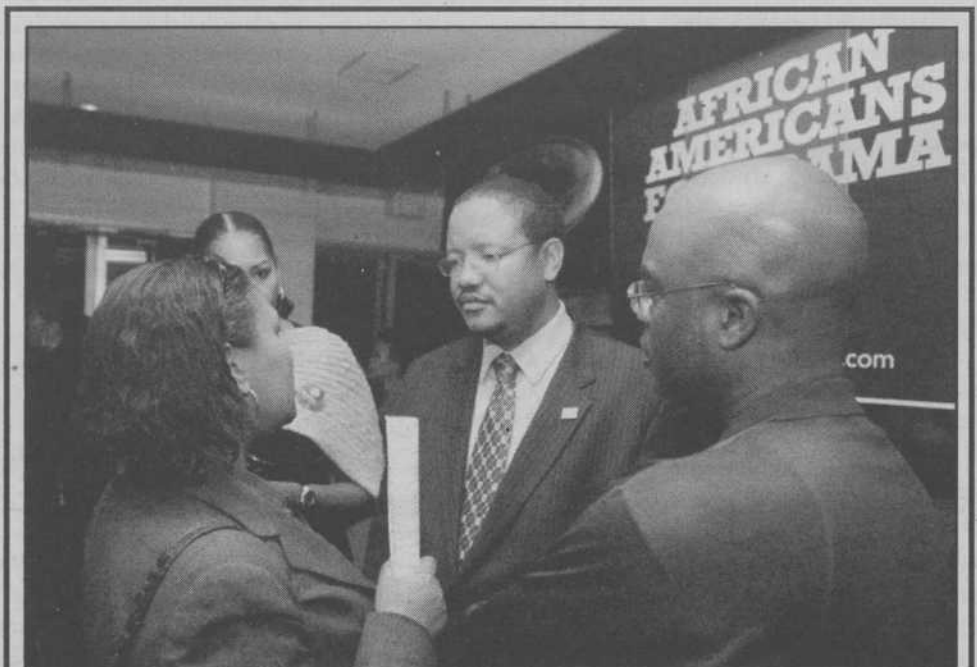
It is well documented that Black Americans — particularly Black males — have shorter life expectancies than Whites. But

Blacks do live to become senior citizens.

A Black person born in 2004 had an average life expectancy of 73.1 years, about five years less than for Whites, according to the National Center for Health Statistics.

Obama also criticized Tanner for clearing a Georgia law that requires voters to show government-issued photo IDs at the polls. It was upheld by a federal judge last month.

Opponents say photo ID laws will disenfranchise minorities, the poor and the elderly who don't have driver's licenses or other valid government-issued photo IDs. Supporters of such laws say they are needed to prevent voter fraud. The Supreme Court has agreed to consider Indiana's photo ID law this term. Indiana's law is similar to Georgia's.



LOCAL PINCH HITTERS

Mike Strautmanis, middle with glasses, chats with attendees at Wednesday night's inaugural launch of African-Americans for Obama at the Ice House lounge. Strautmanis is senior advisor for the presidential campaign of Sen. Barack Obama.

Sentinel-Voice photo by Marty Frierson