

# THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

## MEDIA MYTHS ABOUT THE JENA 6

**A local journalist tells the story you haven't heard.**

By Craig Franklin

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Opinion editor Josh Burek talks with Craig Franklin about the distorted story of the Jena 6.

Jena, La. - By now, almost everyone in America has heard of Jena, La., because they've all heard the story of the "Jena 6." White students hanging nooses barely punished, a schoolyard fight, excessive punishment for the six black attackers, racist local officials, public outrage and protests – the outside media made sure everyone knew the basics.

There's just one problem: The media got most of the basics wrong. In fact, I have never before witnessed such a disgrace in professional journalism. Myths replaced facts, and journalists abdicated their solemn duty to investigate every claim because they were seduced by a powerfully appealing but false narrative of racial injustice.

I should know. I live in Jena. My wife has taught at Jena High School for many years. And most important, I am probably the only reporter who has covered these events from the very beginning.

The reason the Jena cases have been propelled into the world spotlight is two-fold: First, because local officials did not speak publicly early on about the true events of the past year, the media simply formed their stories based on one-side's statements – the Jena 6. Second, the media were downright lazy in their efforts to find the truth. Often, they simply reported what they'd read on blogs, which expressed only one side of the issue.

The real story of Jena and the Jena 6 is quite different from what the national media presented. It's time to set the record straight.

**Myth 1: The Whites-Only Tree.** There has never been a "whites-only" tree at Jena High School. Students of all races sat underneath this tree. When a student asked during an assembly at the start of school last year if anyone could sit under the tree, it evoked laughter from everyone present – blacks and whites. As reported by students in the assembly, the question was asked to make a joke and to drag out the assembly and avoid class.

**Myth 2: Nooses a Signal to Black Students.** An investigation by school officials, police, and an FBI agent revealed the true motivation behind the placing of two nooses in the tree the day after the assembly. According to the expulsion committee, the crudely constructed nooses were *not* aimed at black students. Instead, they were understood to be

a prank by three white students aimed at their fellow *white* friends, members of the school rodeo team. (The students apparently got the idea from watching episodes of "Lonesome Dove.") The committee further concluded that the three young teens had no knowledge that nooses symbolize the terrible legacy of the lynchings of countless blacks in American history. When informed of this history by school officials, they became visibly remorseful because they had many black friends. Another myth concerns their punishment, which was not a three-day suspension, but rather nine days at an alternative facility followed by two weeks of in-school suspension, Saturday detentions, attendance at Discipline Court, and evaluation by licensed mental-health professionals. The students who hung the nooses have not publicly come forward to give their version of events.

Myth 3: Nooses Were a Hate Crime. Although many believe the three white students should have been prosecuted for a hate crime for hanging the nooses, the incident did not meet the legal criteria for a federal hate crime. It also did not meet the standard for Louisiana's hate-crime statute, and though widely condemned by all officials, there was no crime to charge the youths with.

Myth 4: DA's Threat to Black Students. When District Attorney Reed Walters spoke to Jena High students at an assembly in September, he did not tell black students that he could make their life miserable with "the stroke of a pen." Instead, according to Walters, "two or three girls, white girls, were chit-chatting on their cellphones or playing with their cellphones right in the middle of my dissertation. I got a little irritated at them and said, 'Pay attention to me. I am right now having to deal with an aggravated rape case where I've got to decide whether the death penalty applies or not.' I said, 'Look, I can be your best friend or your worst enemy. With the stroke of a pen I can make your life miserable so I want you to call me before you do something stupid.'"

Mr. Walters had been called to the assembly by police, who had been at the school earlier that day dealing with some students who were causing disturbances. Teachers and students have confirmed Walters's version of events.

Myth 5: The Fair Barn Party Incident. On Dec. 1, 2006, a private party – not an all-white party as reported – was held at the local community center called the Fair Barn. Robert Bailey Jr., soon to be one of the Jena 6, came to the party with others seeking admittance.

When they were denied entrance by the renter of the facility, a white male named Justin Sloan (not a Jena High student) at the party attacked Bailey and hit him in the face with his fist. This is reported in witness statements to police, including the victim, Robert Bailey, Jr.

Months later, Bailey contended he was hit in the head with a beer bottle and required stitches. No medical records show this ever occurred. Mr. Sloan was prosecuted for simple battery, which according to Louisiana law, is the proper charge for hitting someone with a fist.

Myth 6: The "Gotta-Go" Grocery Incident. On Dec. 2, 2006, Bailey and two other black Jena High students were involved in an altercation at this local convenience store, stemming from the incident that occurred the night before. The three were accused by police of jumping a white man as he entered the store and stealing a shotgun from him. The two parties gave conflicting statements to police. However, two unrelated eye witnesses of the event gave statements that corresponded with that of the white male.

Myth 7: The Schoolyard Fight. The event on Dec. 4, 2006 was consistently labeled a "schoolyard fight." But witnesses described something much more horrific. Several black students, including those now known as the Jena 6, barricaded an exit to the school's gym as they lay in wait for Justin Barker to exit. (It remains unclear why Mr. Barker was specifically targeted.)

When Barker tried to leave through another exit, court testimony indicates, he was hit from behind by Mychal Bell. Multiple witnesses confirmed that Barker was immediately knocked unconscious and lay on the floor defenseless as several other black students joined together to kick and stomp him, with most of the blows striking his head. Police speculate that the motivation for the attack was related to the racially charged fights that had occurred during the previous weekend.

Myth 8: The Attack Is Linked to the Nooses. Nowhere in any of the evidence, including statements by witnesses and defendants, is there any reference to the noose incident that occurred three months prior. This was confirmed by the United States attorney for the Western District of Louisiana, Donald Washington, on numerous occasions.

Myth 9: Mychal Bell's All-White Jury. While it is true that Mychal Bell was convicted as an adult by an all-white jury in June (a conviction that was later overturned with his case sent to juvenile

court), the jury selection process was completely legal and withstood an investigation by the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division. Court officials insist that several black residents were summoned for jury duty, but did not appear.

Myth 10: Jena 6 as Model Youth. While some members were simply caught up in the moment, others had criminal records. Bell had at least four prior violent-crime arrests before the December attack, and was on probation during most of this year.

Myth 11: Jena Is One of the Most Racist Towns in America. Actually, Jena is a wonderful place to live for both whites and blacks. The media's distortion and outright lies concerning the case have given this rural Louisiana town a label it doesn't deserve.

Myth 12: Two Levels of Justice. Outside protesters were convinced that the prosecution of the Jena 6 was proof of a racially biased system of justice. But the US Justice Department's investigation found no evidence to support such a claim. In fact, the percentage of blacks and whites prosecuted matches the parish's population statistics.

These are just 12 of many myths that are portrayed as fact in the media concerning the Jena cases. (A more thorough review of all events can be found at [www.thejenatimes.net](http://www.thejenatimes.net) – click on Chronological Order of Events.)

As with the Duke Lacrosse case, the truth about Jena will eventually be known. But the town of Jena isn't expecting any apologies from the media. They will probably never admit their error and have already moved on to the next "big" story. Meanwhile in Jena, residents are getting back to their regular routines, where friends are friends regardless of race. Just as it has been all along.

- *Craig Franklin is assistant editor of The Jena Times.*