

Hope must prevail

Written by James Harper Special to the NNPA from the Florida Courier
Monday, 22 July 2013 11:36



Like millions around the world, I'm still numb after learning a jury of six women – five Whites, one Hispanic – found George Zimmerman "not guilty" of murdering Trayvon Martin.

The only saving grace is while I was at the Seminole County Courthouse, I saw a melting pot of young protesters – many White – who were also upset with the verdict.

This said to me our next generation of lawmakers and leaders will change a system of laws that still make it hard for Blacks and others to achieve justice when they are wronged, and are the victims of others who manipulate the system to kill innocent people.

A unique view

As a reporter, I had the unique vantage point of not only watching the Zimmerman trial on TV, but of covering the story in Sanford. I met and spoke with many of the major players and with ordinary citizens.

I talked to a diverse group of people – the Rev. Al Sharpton; NAACP President Ben Jealous; local Sanford pastor Valarie Houston of Allen Chapel AME; Sanford City Manager Norton

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Bonaparte; and the local NAACP branch president, Turner Clayton.

I interviewed Attorneys Darryl Parks and Ben Crump, who represented Sybrina Fulton and Tracy Martin, Trayvon Martin's parents. I met the parents in January.

I was in Sanford on March 31, 2012 when 30,000 people marched, demanding that Zimmerman be arrested.

Residents expected acquittal

Many marchers expected a jury to convict Zimmerman for profiling, stalking and eventually murdering an innocent teenager because he was "walking while Black."

Sanford residents were not as optimistic. Most believed Zimmerman would be found not guilty. The faith of at least one pastor, Houston of Allen Chapel AME Church, must be shaken; she was one of the few who I spoke with last week who refused to believe that Zimmerman wouldn't be found guilty.

Did they know?

Were these Black residents, who believed the jury would find Zimmerman not guilty, seeing the trial through the eyes of the many of the Whites who have oppressed them in Sanford over decades?

In retrospect, looking at all what have transpired since Trayvon Martin was killed February 26, 2012, did we all have blinders on? Was there a conspiracy of the "good old boy network?" (Good old boys wear skirts, too.)

Here's a "conspiracy" timeline. Sanford police refused to arrest Zimmerman. Prosecutors initially refused to press charges. Florida Gov. Rick Scott appoints special prosecutor Angela Corey. She overcharges Zimmerman with 2nd degree murder.

Five White women and one Hispanic woman are chosen for the jury – in a city that is 30 percent Black. The judge refuses to let race be a factor during the trial.

Prosecutors believe Zimmerman's version of the story until they present their closing argument. Prosecutors straddle a dummy – siding with the defense that Trayvon was on top when Zimmerman shot him. Reasonable doubt creeps in.

Trial botched

The prosecutors botched this trial from the beginning. Instead of accepting Zimmerman's version as gospel, they should have repeated over and over that Trayvon had a right to defend himself. Trayvon was afraid of a "creepy ass cracker" following him. Trayvon had the right to use "any means necessary" to defend himself from Zimmerman – the true thug, the initial aggressor.

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IT WAS RAINING. Trayvon put a hoodie over his head to protect himself from the elements. The kid was coming from the store. He was scared. He ran. Still this "creep" followed him because he saw a Black boy walking through a gated community with a hoodie.

Would the White women on the jury have seen this as racial profiling if the judge had allowed it in as part of the discussion? Probably not. They never walked in the shoes of a 17-year-old Black child.

But I have. I was 17 once.

I know the feeling

I can remember back in Port Orange, Fla. (a mostly White suburb of Daytona Beach) where I was in high school from 1977 to 1980. Public schools in Florida had only recently become racially desegregated.

Many "creepy" White folks followed me with their eyes when I went to stores and when I visited my White friends in all-White neighborhoods. I could site numerous examples where I was followed because I was Black.

I accept the verdict

I've come to grips with why the jury found Zimmerman not guilty. And to quote a great American, "I still have a dream." But when will Black boys and girls be judged "by the content of their character and not the color of their skin"?

There will unfortunately be more Trayvon Martins. Some believe this verdict has given White men a license to kill Blacks boys and men, at least in the state of Florida.

Will the outcome be different with the next high-profile case with similar circumstances? We will soon find out.

Another case coming

The same prosecutors will be involved in a case involving a 45-year old White man and a 17-year old Black child who was killed at a Jacksonville gas station allegedly for his refusal to turn off loud music blaring from the teen's car.

State Attorney Angela Corey – whose office was appointed to prosecute Zimmerman – said she will personally prosecute Michael Dunn, who has invoked "standing his ground" as a defense when he shot and killed 17-year-old Jordan Davis in Jacksonville, Fla. on November 26, 2012 – nine months after Trayvon was shot. Zimmerman prosecutor John Guy will be assisting her.

Will the end result be the same? Considering what happened in Sanford last week, my body shudders at the thought.

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Wide awake

The Zimmerman trial has been a wakeup call for all of us here.

Like many other Black males living in Florida, should I now be even more worried about "walking while Black" – if there is a system in place that allows us to be killed even when we've done nothing criminally wrong?

What we must do

We must register to vote so we can serve on juries. We must fight to restore more than 100,000 ex-felons' civil rights so that they can vote and serve on juries. However, most importantly, we must vote to put people in office who will change the laws on the books that are still weighed heavily against us.

Trayvon's parents are hoping and praying that justice for their son will be found at the federal level. Will the Department of Justice file charges against Zimmerman for killing Trayvon?

To me, this is a no brainer. But I also thought Zimmerman would be found guilty.

As Jesse Jackson says, "Keep hope alive." Right now, that is the least we can do.

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