

# THE TORCH

## CIVIL RIGHTS TEAM PROJECT NEWSLETTER

January 2008

Newsletter Editor: Amy Homans

### **Racism Is A Grown up Disease. Let's Stop Using Kids to Spread It.**

Ruby Bridges



### **FEBRUARY IS BLACK HISTORY MONTH**

Black History month is perhaps the most supported and celebrated month on the civil rights calendar in terms of resources for schools and students. While there is seemingly no end to classroom based activities focused on the history of blacks in this country, this is also a good month in which to educate the educators on how to address bias incidents in your school community. Teaching Tolerance provides the perfect means with which to do that with its "Six Lessons from Jena."

By way of background, the small town of Jena, Louisiana has been home to racial tensions and much media coverage ever since white students hung three nooses in the "white tree" on the grounds of the town's high school.

The chain of events began at the high school's opening year assembly in September 2006 when a black student asked the principal if he could sit underneath the "white tree." The "white tree" was a large shade tree under which white, but not black, students sat in order to escape the broiling sun. The principal told the student that he could sit anywhere he wanted. However, when black students later showed up to sit under the tree, they found three nooses hanging from its branches.

Racial tensions were inflamed by a number of events that followed, including: 1) the superintendent overturned the principal's recommendation that the students involved be expelled in favor of a three day suspension; 2) black parents were not allowed to speak at local meetings on the situation; and 3) the district attorney consistently used prosecutorial discretion to decline to charge or to under charge white students and to grossly over charge black students involved in a number of fights that followed the initial incident. A fight between white and black students that left one white student with bruises and a concussion and six black students indicted for attempted murder finally galvanized civil rights activists on a national level and brought intense media scrutiny and thousands of protestors to tiny Jena.

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There are many lessons to be learned from this situation that actually began with the social segregation of black and white students at the Jena high school. Some significant lessons for educators and administrators lie in the steps that were taken, and not taken, both before and after the discovery of the nooses.

In response to the events in Jena, Teaching Tolerance published an article entitled "Six Lessons from Jena." "Six Lessons from Jena" is the roadmap to follow for any school struggling to effectively address bias incidents among its student body. By following this roadmap, school officials will have the tools they need to confront bias incidents with confidence and conviction.

The Civil Rights Team Project thanks Teaching Tolerance for giving it permission to reprint "Six Lessons From Jena" in full.

### SIX LESSONS FROM JENA

*by Jennifer Holladay*

*The [prosecutions](#) of six black teenagers in Jena, La., have captured the nation's attention, with thousands of protestors (and nearly as many reporters) descending on the small town last week. As school professionals, we must never lose sight of the fact that it all started with [nooses](#) hanging from a schoolyard tree. Six lessons we must take to heart:*

**1. Don't ignore obvious signs of trouble.**

In Jena, a black student approached the high school principal and asked, "Can we sit under *that tree*?" On campus, it was known as the "White Tree" -- a place where white students historically gathered. The principal said they could sit wherever they liked. It was an appropriate response, yet one that overlooked the core issue: Why did students feel like they needed to ask for permission? What did the very question reveal about the school's racial climate?

**2. [Examine your school's climate.](#)**  
You may think your school is "no Jena High" -- but do you know for sure? Are there divisions about which you're unaware?

In a survey conducted last year by Teaching Tolerance, the National Education Association and the Civil Rights Project, the vast majority of teachers nationally said their schools were largely free of racial or ethnic tensions.

Students, however, paint a very different picture.

They [describe](#) their schools as "quick to put people into categories," and [one in four](#) report being victimized in racial or ethnic incidents in a typical school year. Race and ethnicity aren't the only lines of division, either: 70 percent of female students say they've been sexually harassed at school; [75 percent](#) of gay students report hearing anti-gay slurs frequently or often at school, and more than a third say they've been physically harassed.

**3. [Take bias incidents seriously.](#)**  
After a few black students sat under the "White Tree," three white students hung nooses from it. Jena's white school superintendent, Roy Breithaupt, later told the *Chicago Tribune*, "Adolescents play pranks. I

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don't think it was a threat against anybody."

In truth, the hanging of nooses was no youthful prank; it was a bias incident connoting racial lynchings. As Caseplia Bailey, whose son Robert is among the Jena Six, told Britain's *Observer*, the act "meant the KKK, it meant ... 'We're going to kill you, we're gonna' hang you 'til you die.'"

By their very nature, bias incidents intend to demean or instill fear in those targeted, and schools must address them quickly, consistently and effectively.

#### **4. Provide forums for meaningful discussion.**

When bias incidents occur, schools must open lines of communication, not shut down debate. In Jena:

- After black students gathered around the "White Tree" as political protest, the principal called a school assembly during which he said it was time to put the noose incident behind them for the sake of the school. The district attorney spoke next, flanked by police officers, warning students: "With a stroke of my pen, I can make your lives disappear" -- the equivalent of throwing gasoline on a fire.
- When black parents showed up at a school board meeting, they were not allowed to speak. When they showed up again, board members allowed a spokesperson to address them, but then quickly moved on to other business without addressing the parents' concerns.

In highly charged bias incidents, schools should hold forums for educators, students, parents and community members and [issue regular updates](#) about the incident, describing

what happened, why the incident was unacceptable and how the school has responded thus far. Schools should invite comments from attendees -- and seek their input about ways the school, students, parents and community can work together to resolve the underlying problems.

#### **5. Use bias incidents as teachable moments.**

Ask teachers to set aside class time to allow students to reflect on what has happened. Because students can influence peer behavior, ask them to write down suggestions for preventing further incidents and promoting respect and to discuss their suggestions in small groups. Because bias incidents often involve the use of bigoted speech (slurs or epithets), conduct lessons to empower students to make respectful language choices.

#### **6. Bridge divisions in the school and the community.**

Organize school-wide events to help students get to know one another and learn about respectful behavior. [Mix It Up at Lunch Day](#) (Nov. 13, 2007) and [No Name-Calling Week](#) (Jan. 21-25, 2008) are excellent events with which to start.

Schools don't exist in isolation, however. If tensions exist in a school, they exist in the larger community, too. Whether through [dialogue](#) or other social justice programs, like those sponsored by the [National League of Cities](#), the events in Jena serve as a call to each of us to explore what divides us -- and what can unite us.

Civil Rights Teams can use "Six Lessons From Jena" by providing copies to your school administrators and school board members. No school can predict when it will

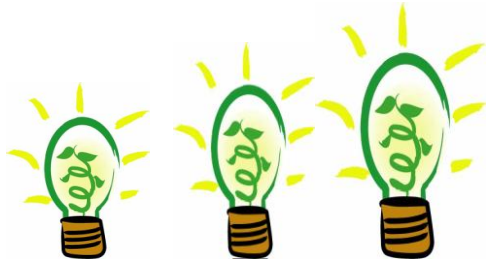
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experience a bias incident of any kind, but it can be fully prepared in the event that one takes place.



### LOOKING FOR IDEAS ON HOW TO CELEBRATE BLACK HISTORY MONTH IN YOUR SCHOOL?

□ **Take a look at** <http://www.timeforkids.com/TFK/specials/bhm/0,8805,97217,00.html> and check out the interactive time line with historical milestones; retrace the steps of the 54 mile march from Selma to Montgomery Alabama by answering questions about the civil rights movement; and listen to three famous speeches: I Have a Dream, JFK's radio address in which he talks about two black students who integrated the U of Alabama, and LBJ's 1965 speech to Congress urging members to support and protect the rights of blacks.

□ **The Biography Channel, at** [www.biography.com/blackhistory](http://www.biography.com/blackhistory), **has dedicated a portion of its website to a number of different Black History Month offerings.**

**There is a very clever video introduction, an outstanding interactive timeline and a number of other excellent features that can be accessed directly from *The Torch*.**

Quoting Greatness Quiz

Who said that? Match the person with their quote.

[Click Here](#)

Videos

With poet Maya Angelou, civil rights leader Jesse Jackson, and more.

[Click Here](#)

Martin Luther King Jr.

Read about the life and legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.

[Click Here](#)

200 Notables

Rosa Parks, Muhammad Ali, Oprah Winfrey... Get to know the icons of Black History.

[Click Here](#)

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### Foundations of Freedom

Learn about the ongoing struggle for equality.

[Click Here](#)

### Classroom

Find creative ideas and tools for bringing Black History into the classroom.

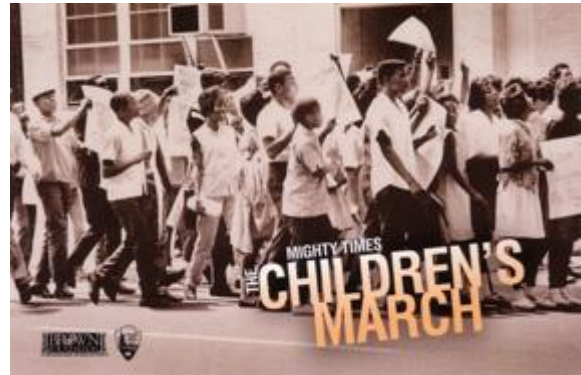
[Click Here](#)

### 101 Fast Facts

Did you know? Discover little known achievements in Black History.

[Click Here](#)

**The content quality of the materials on the Biography Channel site is about as good as it gets and kids will love the innovative use of graphics and video techniques.**



**For those of you interested in a good video that documents the role of youth in the civil rights movement, check out *Mighty Times: The Children's March*, available for free from Teaching Tolerance at [http://www.tolerance.org/teach/resources/childrens\\_march.jsp](http://www.tolerance.org/teach/resources/childrens_march.jsp).**

**This film is also included in the older middle and high school Tool Boxes, so be sure and check your Tool Box to see if you have a copy.**

***Mighty Times: The Children's March*, a 40 minute Academy Award winning documentary, tells the story of how the young people of Birmingham, Alabama stepped up and marched after hundreds of protesting adults were arrested by the Birmingham police. The young people, of whom nearly a thousand were arrested, brought segregation in that city to its**

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**knees after a horrified nation watched television coverage of the children being beaten by police with rubber hoses and attacked by police dogs, upon the orders of police commissioner Bull Connor.**

**Included with the film is a teacher's guide with nine standards based lesson plans. This film is a great choice if you want to show young people how they can be a catalyst for positive change.**

**To order this film, click on [http://www.tolerance.org/pdf/tt\\_materials\\_order\\_form.pdf](http://www.tolerance.org/pdf/tt_materials_order_form.pdf).**

**The Gray-New Gloucester Middle School team, under FA Amanda Hennessey, showed this film in every classroom last year and created a written activity to accompany it. Teams interested in using the film in this way can first view the film and then create a quiz or other written activity, such as an essay contest on the subject of what one person can do to change the world, their community or their school. Award a prize for the best essay or for a random drawing from the top quiz scorers.**



Who are these people and why are they significant to any discussion of the history of blacks in America?

**Barack Obama** should be familiar to all of us. He is the first black man to be a near front runner in the race for the presidency of the United States. **Condoleezza Rice**, as Secretary of State, is the first black woman to hold this position and holds the highest government position of any black woman in history. **U.S. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall** was lead counsel for the NAACP for many years and successfully argued Brown v. Board of Education to the US Supreme Court prior to being sworn in as the first black member of that court. **Emmett Till** never had an opportunity to do any of the things that the other three featured people accomplished in their lives. Emmett

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was a 14 year old boy from Chicago who was abducted from his uncle's Mississippi home in 1955 and brutally beaten to death by several white adults after offhandedly whistling at a white woman earlier that day.

We will never know what Emmett Till and the countless victims of racism in this country could have accomplished and which milestones could have been eclipsed decades ago but for thousands of untimely deaths. However, we are seeing everyday what is being accomplished by people who are no longer denied educational, political or professional opportunities based on the color of their skin. While the situation in Jena reminds us that there is much work yet to be done, enormous strides have been made since the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

□ Consider educating your school community on today's black leaders in America, including: former Secretary of State Colin Powell; current Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice; Massachusetts governor Deval Patrick; media mogul Oprah Winfrey; Illinois senator and presidential contender Barack Obama; Director of the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard University, Henry Louis Gates; Washington, D.C. delegate to the U.S. House of Representatives, Eleanor Holmes Norton; and former chairperson of the NAACP and widow of slain civil rights advocate Medgar Evers, Myrlie Evers-Williams to name just a few of many possibilities.

□ Consider honoring all 40 known victims of civil rights related slayings. Their names and a brief description of the circumstances leading to their deaths can be found at

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=950DE1D91F30F937A35752C1A96F948260>. More information can be obtained for each victim by googling their name. The vast majority of these people are completely unknown to most of us. To honor them in your school community during Black History Month would be a service to their memories and a reminder to all that the attainment of civil rights for blacks was the result of sacrifice by people both ordinary and extraordinary.

### THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD



□ Learn about the Underground Railroad by taking a ride on it with Harriet Tubman who shows you how to follow the North Star to freedom. National Geographic makes this possible simply by clicking on <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/railroad/j2.html>. This is a fun site for elementary school teams.

□ Learn about Portland's Underground Railroad network by going to [www.portlandfreedomtrail.org](http://www.portlandfreedomtrail.org). The Portland Freedom Trail, a historical tribute to the role of Portland in the Anti-Slavery movement and the Underground Railroad includes thirteen locations around the city, commemorated with granite

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markers. The Portland Freedom Trail would make a great walking field trip in the spring for any team within an affordable (!) bus ride of Portland.

□Take a trip through back issues of the January issue of *The Torch* for lots more ideas. For example, the January 2007 issue included information on: the Library of Congress' collection of life stories told by former slaves, the National Park Service's "We Shall Overcome Tour" of places of historic importance to the Civil Rights Movement, two book selections, a link to PBS Kids' activities, Maine's longtime civil rights activist Gerald Talbot and much more.

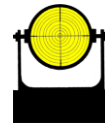


### *The Torch* in Cyberspace!

Yes folks, it looks like it is actually going to happen, and soon. *The Torch* is finally going to be added to the Civil Rights Team Project's web site. Each monthly issue will be posted to the site and back issues will also be available at the click of your mouse. Hopefully, this will make everyone's life a little easier. This is a small, but important, technological step forward for the CRTP towards our goal of putting more resources at your

fingertips. It will also be a significant step towards refreshing our sadly out of date website.

We are not sure of the actual date on which *The Torch* will have its début in cyberspace. As soon as the first postings occur, we will spread the word.



### **SPOTLIGHT SCHOOL: Mildred L. Day School**



This month's Spotlight School is Mildred L. Day School, an elementary school in Arundel. Faculty Advisor Pat Tracy recently reported that her students used National Reading Day to promote the Civil Rights Team and do a great activity with the lower grades. Her team divided into threesomes and went into five second and third grade classes to read the stories "The Clever Boy" and "The Blind Man and The



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Hunter.” These are two page stories from *Rhinos and Raspberries: Tales for the Early Grades*, which have questions and activities at the end of each story. The team members led the discussions of the stories using the prepared materials and received very good reviews from the teachers and students. At last report, the team had plans to take their tales of tolerance to the kindergartners and first graders. They also plan to go back to each classroom later in the year with another story and activity.

Anyone interested in the book used by Pat and the M.L.Day School team can obtain it free of charge from Teaching Tolerance by going to [www.tolerance.org/teach/resources/rhinos.jsp](http://www.tolerance.org/teach/resources/rhinos.jsp). The kit includes a fully illustrated hardcover teacher's edition with 12 stories from around the world that promote character building and literacy, along with ten lesson plans, discussion prompts and activity ideas. It also includes six copies each of two smaller softcover books for reading in smaller groups. This resource is appropriate for pre-k through grade six.



### February 4-8 is National Teen Dating Violence Awareness and Prevention Week

Since 2006, Congress has designated the first week of February as "National Teen Dating Violence Awareness and Prevention Week" in an effort to bring more public awareness to a serious problem confronting teenagers. To help promote this event, a Toolkit of resources was developed to educate teens on the issue of dating violence. Although created for the first National Awareness Week, these Toolkit materials can be used at any time. Print materials have been formatted in PDF for free, easy download. The "Dating and Violence Should Never Be A Couple" DVD costs only \$4.50 with no shipping and handling fee and comes with a free poster. See below for more resources and information on ordering these products.

- [Teen Dating Violence Prevention Poster](#) (2006-08 \*PDF)  
Poster is free with purchase of "Dating and Violence Should Never Be A Couple" DVD. See below for more information.
- [Warning Signs & Prevention Recommendations](#) (2006-08 \*PDF)

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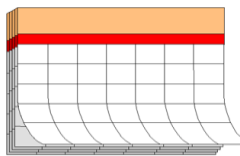
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- ["Dating And Violence Should Never Be A Couple"](#) (2006-2008)  
Teenagers talk about their personal experiences with teen dating violence to evoke thought and dialogue among teens, educators, parents and other appropriate professionals. The DVD is \$4.50 (including shipping and handling and a free Teen Dating Violence Prevention Poster). To place an order, visit the [ABA web store](#) or call 800-285-2221. The Product Code is 3070001.
- [Teacher's Guide](#) (2006-08)
- [Toolkit Instructions](#) (2006)
- [Attention Educators Card](#) (2006)
- [Thank You Card](#) (2006)

Please make sure that other interested staff members in your school are aware of the availability of these excellent materials. More education on this topic will hopefully lead to fewer incidences of both dating and domestic violence.



### UPCOMING EVENTS AND SIGNIFICANT DATES

**March: Women's History Month**

**May 16, 2008: CRTP Statewide Conference, Augusta Civic Center**  
Save the date and book your bus now.

If you are not receiving your issues of *The Torch* via e-mail, please contact Debi Lettre at [debi.lettre@maine.gov](mailto:debi.lettre@maine.gov) and provide her with your e-mail address.



**“Extra, Extra, Read All About It!”** Has your team just completed a successful project, read a great book, had a good fundraiser, listened to an inspiring speaker, seen a compelling video, or done something that was just plain fun that you would like to share with other teams? If we don't hear about it, we can't share it with other teams. Give your team a chance to be the next Spot Light School by sharing what you have been up to. Send in a blurb to *The Torch* and we will include it in a future issue. Send your news to [amy@maine.rr.com](mailto:amy@maine.rr.com) with the subject heading: **Newsletter item.**

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*This newsletter is written and distributed by the Civil Rights Team Project, a state-wide program under the auspices of the Maine Office of the Attorney General. The mission of the Civil Rights Team Project is to increase the safety of high school, middle school and elementary school students and to reduce the incidence of bias-motivated harassment and violence in schools.*

**G. Steven Rowe --- Attorney General**  
**Thomas A. Harnett—Director, Civil Rights Education & Enforcement Unit**  
**Debi Lettre, Civil Rights Project Administrator**