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## Jena Six opinions come in many shades

By Myron B. Pitts

Columnist

Many folks responded to my Sunday column on the Jena Six, the accused black boys in Louisiana whose case has become a civil rights cause.

An acquaintance of mine, Joe McGee, said he plans on flying to Jena, La., for Thursday's rally. McGee runs a nonprofit group called GOTDAD Inc., a mentoring program made up of young fathers.

Accompanying McGee will be Stephon Ferguson, also of Fayetteville, who is scheduled to do a rendition of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. The men plan to send live feeds to Bronco Square at Fayetteville State University on Thursday starting at 11 a.m.

McGee said he is going to Jena to protest injustice. He said he missed what he called the last call to action, the Million Man March in 1995. He said he wanted to go but didn't know whether he would have a job when he came back.

"That bothered me for the longest," McGee said. "Now, I'm a business owner. I control my own destiny. I made up my mind to go three weeks ago. Nothing could stop me."

The Jena Six boys were initially charged with attempted second-degree murder after they beat a white student who called them the N-word. The assault occurred after several racial incidents, stirred up by white students who hung a noose to protest black students sitting under a whites-only tree (The tree has since been cut down).

Five of the Jena Six still face battery charges. The national NAACP estimates that Thursday, Jena, population 3,000, will swell to as much as 20 times its size as protesters arrive by buses from across the country.

### Readers respond

Some people who called and e-mailed me said that I should have condemned the assault in my Sunday column.

Steve Wood, in an e-mail, condemned racism but added that it is still not acceptable to jump someone and beat them up for being ignorant. That behavior doesn't change things ... it makes them worse.

I concede I should have pointed out what I thought was obvious: You can't go around beating the heck out of someone who calls you a slur, even if it's the worst thing a white person can say to a black person. True, the victim only stayed in the hospital for a short time and was at a party the next day but that's not the point.

The Jena Six boys should have walked away and reported the slur to the principal. Bear in mind, however, these are the same authorities who gave the students who hung the noose just a three-day suspension.

I repeat that the fair handling of the noose incident would have short-circuited everything that followed. School leaders failed the children and their community.

Other people who called or e-mailed me were glad I wrote the column.

Betty Smith, 49, pointed out in an e-mail that interest in the case is not limited to college students.

"I am going to Jena," she said.

Quenton Gilliam questioned why black celebrities had not weighed in on the Jena Six. Where are the rappers such as Jay-Z and Kanye West, he asked.

"Where is the support from them? We don't have a James Brown, Marvin Gaye or a Sam Cooke.

"Where are the athletes? This generation does not have a Jim Brown or a Jackie Robinson. We don't have a Muhammad Ali or a Kareem Abdul-Jabbar."

I cannot argue with Gilliam on those points.

### Perceiving racism

Diana Seeley called to tell me: "You really get under my skin sometimes."

"I think you like to stir the race issue. I read you a lot and a lot of (columns) just come out in the wrong direction."

Seeley said racism goes both ways. She is white and was educated at the historically black schools of Fayetteville State University and North Carolina Central University in Durham. She says those schools are less integrated than their majority white counterparts.

She said we need to get past racism.

I agree with her. But I believe we need to do the work and confront directly the pockets of racism that persist. Unacknowledged problems cannot be solved.

Then Seeley added something no thinking person would argue with.

"There is every shade of person on this earth," she said, "from the whitest albino to the very darkest of the dark. We are all humans. We need to think about the human element."

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