


A Murder in Jasper, Texas, Brings Back Haunting Memories



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On July 7, 1998, James Byrd Jr. was walking home from a family party in the town of Jasper, Texas. Byrd, a 49-year-old disabled African American, was drunk and staggering down the side of the road when three White men in a pickup truck offered him a ride home. Byrd accepted and jumped in the back, but instead of taking him home, the men drove Byrd down a logging road east of town.

In one of the most heinous crimes in recent American history, Byrd was beaten by the three men, John William King and Shawn Allen Berry, both 23, and Lawrence Brewer, 31. Byrd was then tied to the back of the pickup with a 24-foot-long chain and dragged behind as Berry drove down the road. Parts of his body were found more than two miles down the road; the discoveries ended at his decapitated torso. Byrd's severed head was found about a mile away from his dumped body. His face had been sprayed with black paint.

The murder immediately put Jasper in the national spotlight. In its wake, the Ku Klux Klan, the New Black Panther Party, Jesse Jackson and others descended on the small town, bringing back memories of the confrontations that occurred throughout

the South during the Civil Rights Movement only several decades earlier.

The trial of King, Berry and Brewer took place a year later, in November 1999. All three suspects had previous criminal records, and two of the men were believed to have connections to the Aryan Nation, a White supremacist group. In addition to all state charges, federal hate crime charges were brought against the trio, which made them eligible for the death penalty. After a long trial and two days of deliberation, all three were found guilty of murder. King and Brewer were sentenced to die by lethal injection, and Berry to life in prison. It was a historic sentencing—the first time in Texas that a White man received the death penalty for killing a Black man.

Byrd's family and lawmakers lobbied for a new hate crime bill to be passed in Texas. Governor George W. Bush refused to support the measure, arguing that it created unnecessary distinctions for gays. Then on May 12, 2001, the new Texas governor, Rick Perry, signed the hate crime bill that strengthened the penalties for crimes motivated by the victim's race, religion, gender and sexual preference. The measure was called the James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Act.

LESSON PLAN

Two of the three convicted murderers received the death penalty for their crimes. Should crimes motivated by hate based on race, religion, gender and sexual preference carry stiffer penalties than "ordinary" crimes?

Write a short argumentative essay and find a newspaper article that helps you defend your position.

References: www.chron.com/content/chronicle/special/jasper/byrd

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