
Bienville House Center for Peace and Justice

Post Office Box 4363, Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70821
(225) 343-5230 – phbrla@aol.com

Winter 2008

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

--Martin Luther King, Jr.

By now, everyone has heard of the Jena Six, though actually the news was slow to break in LA, while the headlines of racial injustice flashed across the nation and the world. This past year has been a rollercoaster of events in the small town of Jena, LA. Escalating racial conflicts surrounding the local high school in Jena began with the hanging of nooses in a tree, followed by fights between white and black students, and culminating in the beating of a white boy and the arrest of six black students, who were charged with aggravated second degree assault.

Bail was set so high for the boys that several families had to leverage their homes; all but one, Mychal Bell, who could not make bail and has been in jail since Dec., 2006. Mychal Bell's trial was a highly contested and distorted application of the law. He was tried by an all-white jury; his court-appointed attorney provided an inadequate defense in the midst of a racially charged environment; and Mychal Bell was found guilty. Details of the case are still being debated, but the situation in Jena turned back the covers on the fact that racism was alive and thriving in the sleepy town of Jena.

We all know this story; however, I would like to point to some of the positive things that arose in the midst of the outcry. While national organizations rushed to get involved in the foray, such as Colors of Justice, the NAACP, the ACLU, as well as national white

supremacist groups, local, community activism rose to meet the challenge. Churches and religious leaders across the state stood up to the call for justice. From B.R., ministers like Dan Krutz, head of the Federation of Churches and Synagogues (now the Interfaith Council) traveled to Jena to speak with religious leaders there, particular the black church leaders. Also, from B.R., Rev. Steve Crump, of the Unitarian Church spoke out to the community as a whole. The University Presbyterian Church held a well-attended candlelight vigil on the eve of Bell's scheduled sentencing.

Bienville House hosted numerous community meetings and helped launch a very active group called, of course, the Jena Six, which became a source for information and planning. Bienville House sponsored a community forum at the Eddie Robinson YMCA, which was facilitated by Maxine Crump, Dan Krutz, and Irvin Peckham and attended by local residents and students from S.U. and L.S.U. As information spread through the community and around the state, a march was planned in Jena to support Mychal Bell on the day of his sentencing. A rally was arranged at the Capitol steps for those who could not make the trip to Jena. There was a groundswell of concern in preparing for a peaceful protest that brought our community together with new unity and purpose.

Bob Dorroh took the initiative and rented a bus on behalf of the Unitarian Church, which filled quickly with participants from throughout the community in the early hours of the morning of the march in Jena. There was a long drive, but upon arriving at dawn in Jena,

we were surrounded by hundreds of other buses and other vehicles, while thousands of people descended upon the tense, silent little town. The crowd that day rose to almost 20,000, and yes, it was a peaceful march – a day of unity. The attendees were somewhat split in two main locations, many buses were directed to a park just outside of town, where Rev. Jesse Jackson spoke; while others were focused in the heart of town, where Rev. Al Sharpton spoke to the crowd. Jackson’s message was one of reconciliation and forgiveness, though Sharpton’s tone was more strident.

The day culminated in the march into town by all participants. The atmosphere was overall one of celebration and relief, as people returned to the park and sampled some good home cooking provided by local residents. The ride home was quieter as we drove through the countryside speckled by farm folk along the

road waving enthusiastically at the caravan of buses returning from Jena.

Since that event, some things have changed; some have not. Organizing continues as the B.R. community tries to reach out to those in Jena. William Winters has been a stalwart leader in this struggle. He has helped organize a series of meeting at the Unitarian Church to share current information on the situation in Jena and to develop strategic planning for future activities in Jena and within our own community. The Jena Six still face a legal morass; though their charges have been reduced, racial trauma and foreseeable jail time have thoroughly disrupted their education and future prospects. We have so much work yet to do to resolve, reconcile and help to heal the open wounds that racism still renders within our society today.

PAULA HENDERSON

Recent Bienville House Events & Activities

- Bienville House sponsored Stacy Sauce and Jeff Shoji’s trip to this year’s annual School of the Americas Watch protest on November 19th.
- In response to the Jena Six situation, Bienville House became involved in community dialogue and peaceful protests, both in Baton Rouge and Jena (see Paula Henderson’s story above).
- In an effort to bring progressive community radio to Baton Rouge, the Baton Rouge Progressive Network recently filed an application with the FCC for a full-power broadcasting permit. Bienville House is a partner in this effort, and we will keep you posted on the application’s progress (see separate story on page 3 for more details).
- Our holiday party was a great success...see story at right.

The Bienville House Annual Holiday party at Sarah and Irv Peckham’s house was better than ever, with a record crowd--both regulars and new faces--great food (as always) and lots of unusual items for the Silent Auction. It took dedication to pore over the attributes of each item, and by the end of the evening nearly every treasure had a bid and was carted out of the house by a delighted new owner. (Thanks to Hassan who rescued all the pieces that didn’t find a bidder.) Rick’s large size microwave, which was hidden under a table, escaped notice and is currently in Irv’s garage. We would prefer not to have to save it for next year’s auction, so if anyone needs a microwave for their home or workplace, please call the Peckhams. The grand total of \$1,200 earned from the auction is a nice sum for a bunch of discards. We all look forward to the money going to the causes that we so passionately believe in. Along with the microwave, one very pretty square blue bowl and spoon are waiting for its owner to remember that he or she left it behind.

SARAH PECKHAM

Bringing Peace and Justice to the Airwaves

Imagine the power of uniting groups and individuals working against racism, sexism, homophobia, violence, imperialism and other forms of oppression through local community radio. Imagine the power of relevant, timely community news and local commentary. Imagine diverse local music shows and radio theatre. Imagine a vibrant, progressive radio station in Baton Rouge run and operated by volunteers from our communities who have a passion for truth and social justice. We can have this.

In October of 2007, the Baton Rouge Progressive Network (BRPN) with the support of our partners and members took advantage of a historic opportunity to apply for one of the last available full power non-commercial, educational radio station licenses in our area during a two-week window for new applications to the Federal Communications Commission. Filing for a station license of this kind is a complex and lengthy process that involves retaining the services of a professional broadcast engineer and an experienced FCC communications attorney. With the support of many individuals and some outstanding organizations, BRPN was able to successfully file our application and is now in competition for the one available license in our area with nine other competing applicants, some of whom are local and some of whom are not. The FCC may take several years deciding whom they will finally award the license to based on the technical merits of the applications.

Members of BRPN believe that community-owned and produced media is important and that the benefits of bringing progressive radio to the greater Baton Rouge community are limitless. BRPN wants to serve an otherwise underserved sector of the listening audience by delivering

progressive programming, local voices, networking, and opportunities for community building across the radio waves.

BRPN was founded in 1999 and incorporated as a nonprofit under the laws of the State of Louisiana in June of 2000. The founding vision of BRPN was to form a cooperative of individuals dedicated to facilitating communication and education as they pertain to progressive ideals within the Baton Rouge community. Our partners include the Bienville House for Peace and Justice, the Louisiana Environmental Action Network, the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, and others. Our current board members include Kayla Bourg, Maxine Crump, David Brown, Paula Henderson, Vicki Lancaster, Marylee Orr, Alma Pate, Shirley Sands, Stacy Sauce, Robert Thompson, Jessica Ketcham-Weber, Andrew Weber, Jason Wesley, and William Winters.

We are very excited about the potential of full power broadcasting and look forward to expanding our current network of partners. The community resources and programming we wish to provide will only be at its strongest with participation and support from community allies.

We hope you will consider donating to, supporting and affiliating yourself with BRPN.

We invite you to be part of this exciting and powerful project for social justice! Please visit our website at www.brpnradio.org to learn more about BRPN and to find out about upcoming events or to make a donation. You may also contact us by email at brpnradio@gmail.com. We need your support!

STACY SAUCE

Upcoming Events

- Starting in February, we plan to have short presentations on a topic of interest at the monthly Bienville House meetings. Our first discussion will be led by Dr. Irvin Peckham, who will talk about finding

common ground between liberal and conservative political perspectives. He outlines some of his ideas in an essay on pages 5-7. ***Please join us, and let us know***

if there is a topic that you would like to see addressed in a future discussion.

- We are planning a forum for early April, on "Where Does Your Tax Money Go?"
- Bienville House and Baton Rouge Advocates for Safe Streets (BRASS) are teaming up to bring the Peace Relay to Baton Rouge. The Peace Relay started in Louisville, Kentucky, on November 3, and is "meandering" across the country by bicycle over the next year. The Relay will collect signatures for a petition calling for increased use of alternative transport as a means of

reducing energy consumption and thereby removing the imperative towards war. We are seeking volunteers to cycle the sections of the route from Natchez, Miss to Baton Rouge, and from Baton Rouge to New Orleans, as well as to host cyclists overnight in their homes. For more information contact Fareed Aboul-ela (fareed@aboulela.com) or visit the website: <http://www.bikedepot.org/PeaceTransit/>

- The New Orleans International Human Rights Film Festival (details below).

The New Orleans International Human Rights Film Festival will be held April 10-20, 2008 according to Jordan Flaherty, festival director. One of the featured films is "The Tunnel Trade" by Laila El-Haddad, a Palestinian journalist/filmmaker from Gaza who has been invited to present her documentary at the festival. "The Tunnel Trade" shows the diverse effects of smuggling goods into Gaza on the local population and was aired on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Laila is a regular contributor to the Guardian Unlimited online edition and Aljazeera's English website and can be heard frequently on the BBC World Service. For more information see the festival's website: www.nolahumanrights.org

Plans are in the making for Bienville House to partner with the New Orleans Film Festival organizers to maximize Laila's media/community exposure while she is down South. Possible venues include UNO and Loyola in New Orleans, and LSU and the Unitarian Church in Baton Rouge. BH will be publicizing this event later in the spring.

JULIE SUKKAR

News of Members

- Bienville House deeply regrets the passing of longtime LSU professor and researcher, **Samuel P. Meyers**. He was 82 and died at his home on November 2, 2007 after a long illness. Sam, along with his wife Trudi, was a sustaining member of BH for many, many years and left us a very generous donation. He will be greatly missed. A memorial service was held for him at the Unitarian Church in Baton Rouge on November 30. Among Sam's many accomplishments were his expertise in food science and marine science. As consultant to the Food and Aquaculture Division of the United Nations, he traveled all over the world giving lectures and providing information. But what his family remembers best was his "unique and witty sense of humor." Sam loved to make people laugh. Although a great scientist,

Sam did not neglect the Humanities... he loved poetry and, over the decades, wrote countless poetry of his own. For years, each Christmas he would give/mail that year's poetic contributions with a Forward for each poem. Family and friends looked forward each year to receiving a booklet from him. He also dedicated poems to persons important to him, including family members and good friends and former graduate students of his. He had his own favorite poets, including Alfred Lord Tennyson, whose poem "Crossing the Bar" was read by Trudi at Sam's Memorial Service. The Memorial Service was recorded on CD, in case someone who missed the Service would like a copy. (submitted by Trudi Meyers)

- **Ma'Moun Sukkar** was recently invited by **Dr. Bob Reich** to speak about American

foreign policy in the Middle East at the older adults' Sunday school class of the University United Methodist Church. About 25 people attended the presentation, which was followed by a lively question and answer session. The presentation made the argument that the main cause of Middle East instability is Israeli expansionism. Featuring a slideshow of direct quotes from the leaders of the Zionist movement—from the 1880s to the present day—the presentation highlighted the inevitable impact that the settler regime would have on the native Palestinian population as their homeland was usurped. Both the Middle East and the U.S. are still suffering from American support of this colonial enterprise.

- At a ceremony held on October 27th, LSU's School of Landscape Architecture was named after its founder, **Dr. Robert "Doc" Reich**. Doc established the School of Landscape Architecture in 1941, and for more than four decades he directed the program and helped it grow into one of the highest-ranked in the country. According to a 2007 study by Design Intelligence, the leading journal of the design professions, LSU's undergraduate landscape architecture program is the best in the U.S., while the graduate program was ranked fifth for the second year in a row. Although Doc retired in 1983, he remains professor emeritus and

continues to teach, leading seminars and field trips.

- *Ice Cream Stories, My Life as Told to My Students* is a recently published book about **Dr. Bob Reich**. Compiled by Suzanne Turner and Christine Leger, it tells of Doc's anecdotes and adventures, from his early days in New York to his development of the LSU School of Landscape Architecture. Copies are available through the School of Landscape Architecture office; proceeds are going to a scholarship fund at the Robert Reich School of Landscape Architecture.
- **Christie Fisher** of Savannah, Georgia was back home in Baton Rouge over the holidays – with her “thesis in a box” and her MFA in photography in hand. Christie gave an impromptu showing of her work to BH members Ma'Moun and Julie Sukkar and Hassan Ghosn at Coffee Call. Titled “Seeing Red,” her show is a personal statement of anger at the needless suffering caused by war and its promoters. She plans to make a presentation to her congressman, Jack Kingston in the near future.
- **Irvin Peckham** has announced that he will be running for the Democratic State Central Committee to represent District 69.

Please send us a note if you have any news that you would like included in a future newsletter!

OP-ED Essay

The following essay outlines some of the ideas that will form the basis of a discussion that will be led by Irv Peckham at the February Bienville House meeting on February 11th.

"And why do ye call me Lord and not do as I say?"

I have a good friend who labels himself a conservative and thinks of me as a liberal--although I would hardly call myself that. I was thinking this morning of all that my friend and I have in common, and I was wondering about the differences that make my friend think I'm on one

side of a fence and he on the other. I suspect that much of what we have in common may be why he calls me a liberal; it might be just the way we name things that create the illusion of a fence.

For instance, my friend is a Christian. I am an atheist, but I do my best to follow the teachings of

Jesus, who I think was one of the wisest of men, or at least as he was depicted by the New Testament authors. I can open the New Testament to almost any page and hear wisdom. Jesus teaches us to respect the poor, to share our bread without advertising our generosity, to be merciful, to forgive, to love our enemies, to be truthful, to shun vanity, to pray in a closet and not in the street where we may be heard. I am sure my friend believes in these teachings, and so do I, even if both of us fall short at times, but these failures should not stop us from trying to act rightly by asking of ourselves when seeking guidance what Jesus would do. It wouldn't hurt to read Marcus Aurelius as well.

The primary difference between my friend and me seems to center on the role of government. My friend has run his own business most of his life and tends to see government as an external force acting in opposition to the way he wants to run his business. I have a brother-in-law who has been running his own business for thirty years and although he might be described as a progressive, he shares my friend's point of view. He fumes against the regulations and other policies he has adhered to.

I, on the other hand, have been a public school teacher for most of my life, so in some sense, if by government one includes the local community, I have been a government employee. Although my friend wants to live outside the government, and I clearly live inside, we still probably believe many of the same things about the role of government. Neither of us likes bureaucracies, particularly the ones that seem to exist for the sake of those who run them. We are in favor of balanced budgets and minimal government interference in our daily lives. Neither of us likes to pay taxes, although I am sure we both agree that some government and therefore some taxes are necessary. We have some disagreement about where those taxes should go. We might both agree that we do not want such a significant proportion, 21% of the 2008 proposed budget to go to the military, which represents 48% of the military spending for the rest of the world, and neither of us like the 9% that goes toward interest, the consequence, in a large part, of the disproportionate amount we spend for

our wars. My friend probably doesn't want his taxes to go for social services, particularly those services designed to help the poor, which of course takes me back to Jesus. I don't mind the 3% of our budget that goes for education, training, employment, and social services. I am in fact surprised that conservative Christians would resent these taxes while we spend 611 billion dollars for what most of us now know was an unnecessary war of aggression in Iraq. I would argue that calls for a balanced budget while supporting a military that is equal to 48% of what the rest of the world spends on military are puzzling, to say the least. One might ask, who benefits most from our truly outsized military budget? I think my friend living in rural California knows it isn't him. I doubt that he feels threatened by Iraqis who could be interpreted as trying to rid their country of invaders, just as my friend and I might do, had Iraq invaded us and presumed to give us lessons on how to govern according to proper Muslim principles. My friend and I may never have become suicide bombers, but I am quite certain that neither of us would have enlisted in their army or their version of our police, no matter what the pay.

Perhaps the key difference lies in how we imagine our role in the community. I am sure that my friend contributes to his local community in a small Northern California town, just as I try to contribute to my community of Baton Rouge. Up to this point, neither of us has been active in politics, so in a way, we're both members of the crowd throwing bottles from the bleachers. We believe in democracy and, as I have suggested, would fight with violence against any foreign country that tried to invade us to change our way of living.

I have said the difference may lie in how we imagine our roles in the community. I want to broaden that notion to our roles in government, for I see the government as an extension of my community. I am in part responsible for my community. If I disagree with its direction, I should be actively involved in working for change. Perhaps I should even run for office. Likewise with the larger community—our country. If I don't like its direction, I need to work for change.

To me, democracy means that individuals should be ready to get in the game if they don't like the way it's being played-and that means doing more than just voting. We have to imagine ourselves as part of the government. If we think the government is the enemy, I can't imagine how we can claim to believe in democracy. The way I see it, we are the government. Anything less is not democracy. We can of course think the government is so bad that we don't want to have anything to do with it, but that's not the way to support our democratic way of life. You can't just walk away from the game because you don't like the way it's being played.

I thought I was analyzing, but it turns out that I slipped into arguing that my way of seeing government is preferred to my friend's. One always has to be suspicious of one's own description of a socio-political perspective. The opposition always turns out to be the flawed perspective, so I am worried about the way I have described my position here and perhaps even more worried about the way I have described my friend's. I need to hear how he would describe his position. And to hear it, I need to listen seriously to what he says.

To end on a more positive note, I want to get back to summarizing our differences but more important what we have in common. My friend thinks of the government as external to him. In part, I share this perspective since I have never been an active participant and at times a quite active resister, but I still think of the government as our government and that however small the part we play, we are responsible to it and for it. My friend, I think, doesn't want the government to be giving hand-outs to poor people. I agree with him-but I do want the government to work harder to imagine ways of giving our poor a way of working, of being a part of our collective effort to keep the train moving. This means putting money that we have devoted to war to rebuilding our infrastructure, to providing serious education, and to creating work for reasonable pay quite a bit above the minimum wage so that when they work, the poor can do more than just survive. They can be a part of our collective dream. It's not as if we don't have work to do here--one needs only look at

New Orleans. Government has to be a part of the solution to our problems with poverty and our dependence on incarceration to solve the contradiction of the world's wealthiest country having the highest rate of incarceration (0.75% to the next highest, China's, of 0.12 %). Perhaps related to the incarceration rate is income disparity-among developed countries, only Mexico and Russia have higher wealth inequality than the United States, implying a link between inequality and incarceration.

I do not mean to imply that our government should play Robin Hood. The resolution of this essential contradiction between wealth inequality and incarceration rates lies not in taking and giving but rather in restructuring government and social structures that have created this contradiction. We need to find ways to restrict government corruption through the influence of lobbyists, revolving doors, and family connections between officials and organizations that profit from government policies. More succinctly, we need better ways of policing ourselves. Concomitantly, we need to create structures that will provide work for responsible wages, education, and health care to the dispossessed. It doesn't work to just throw them into the water to see who can swim. We need to give them lessons. We need to care about them. I would say anything less is to ignore what Jesus tried to teach us.

I am certain that in our adherence to Jesus' teachings, my friend and I find our common values. It doesn't matter that I am an atheist and he's a Christian. To me, it doesn't matter whether Jesus' words came from God or from his narrators. They mean the same thing, and I think they reflect wisdom, democratic values, and the collective good at the expense of greed. My friend and I both want to improve the health of our country. We would rather see it as a community that works together than as a team of horses each going in its own direction. I think this country would be better off if we all read the New Testament and actually paid attention to what Jesus' narrators said he said.

IRVIN PECKHAM