

November 8, 2007 Article by William Winters on the Jena Six

Baton Rouge residents responded strongly to the news of the injustices of Jena. There were many independent loci of action – university students, politicians, churches, radio stations, and concerned citizen-activists all worked to raise awareness of the Jena Six within their circles.

The Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge first became active participants in the fight for equitable outcomes for the Jena Six in early August, when pastor Steve Crump and staff member William Winters gave a talk from the pulpit to inform the congregation of – as Crump put it – “the what, so what, and the now what.” This was swiftly followed by vociferous institutional and congregational support for the Jena Six. UCBR passed a resolution authorizing staff to public advocate for the Jena Six on the church’s behalf. The board, in the meantime, donated half of the cash offerings collected during the month of September to the Jena Six Legal Defense Fund. The position of Advocacy Staff William Winters, who was just finishing a stint in Americorps, was continued specifically for the purpose of providing additional leadership and support in the Church and in the community at large for the Jena Six. In collaboration with the Bienville House Center for Peace and Justice and the Baton Rouge Council on Human Relations, a community meeting on the Jena Six was hastily arranged, with over 50 members of the Baton Rouge community attending. A series of action items was proposed and adopted, with two primary goals: first, to overcome widespread ignorance of the details of the case, and second, to express solidarity with Jena Six by travelling to Jena for the protest on September 20 and by organizing a local solidarity rally.

Members of the action committee addressed the first goal in various ways. First, a researched and footnoted chronology of the events in Jena was produced by members and distributed to the group. A set of talking points followed, so that everyone talking about the events in Jena would tell the same story and stay on message. Next, members held a meeting with the editorial board of The Advocate, Baton Rouge’s largest newspaper. The board agreed to produce original local coverage of the events in Jena as well as the public events information and solidarity events held throughout Baton Rouge. To further inform the public, the Bienville House Center for Peace and Justice sponsored the well-attended “A Community Dialogue on the Jena Six.” The Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge and University Presbyterian Church co-sponsored a candlelight prayer vigil entitled “Prayers for Peace and Justice in Jena,” which drew just over one hundred community members brightening Dalrymple Drive.

In addition, members networked with students at Southern University, LSU, and the NAACP who were also working to inform people about and demonstrate support for the Jena 6. Students at Southern, led by the Student Government Association and Iota Phi Theta service fraternity, were particularly active, holding “Jena Week.” This included an information forum, a prayer vigil, and a march around the campus. In conjunction with the Legislative Black Caucus, Southern and Southern Law students organized 5 buses to Jena. LSU students, led by Shanelle Matthews, a journalism senior and student activist, chartered 2 buses to Jena and held an information forum at LSU. Meanwhile, a member of the Unitarian Church, Bob Dorroh, chartered a bus that carried UCBR congregants, LSU students, and other community members to Jena on for the rally on September 20th that had originally been planned to coincide with Mychal Bell’s sentencing. While many folks went to Jena on September 20th, a small cadre of citizens also worked to plan a small rally in support of the Jena Six at the steps of the state capitol, which went off without a hitch. After the initial flurry of activity around the Jena Six story, activity definitely, even necessarily, slowed in Baton Rouge. The Jena Six are not out of the woods yet, however. Mychal Bell, having been freed on bond, is back in jail for probation violation in what has been by some as retaliation by Jena DA Reed Walters and District Judge J.P. Mauffrey for the heavy scrutiny on their actions related to this case. A November 7th hearing produced no surprises, although Bryant Purvis was finally arraigned in the Jena Six case. The charges on all of the young men have been reduced from attempted second degree murder to aggravated second degree assault and conspiracy to commit the same. These young men face decades in prison if convicted. Support for the Jena Six is still needed. The Jena Six Legal Defense Fund has nearly been depleted, and there could be years of litigation ahead if the young men’s cases go to trial. In addition, motions have been filed by media organizations seeking to unseal the now-secret proceedings of Mychal Bell’s legal battle, his being dealt with in juvenile court. Motions described by Friends of Justice executive director as “state of the art” have been filed on behalf of all the young men asking for a change of venue and the recusal of Walters and Mauffrey from their cases. In addition, political pressure to investigate the actions of Reed Walters should still be exerted on powerful statewide officials such as the attorney general and governor. Stay tuned for additional opportunities to provide support for the Jena Six as their fight for equity continues. --ww3

[Article in The Advocate on Sept. 18](#)
[Jena Six Timeline](#)

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