Truth and Reconciliation Comes to the South

Lessons from Greensboro

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By Jill Williams

On November 3, 1979, a caravan of Klansmen and neonazis from Greensboro, North Carolina and the surrounding areas confronted demonstrators preparing for a "Death to the Klan" rally called by the multi-racial Communist Workers Party (CWP) in the city's Black Morningside Homes public housing community. Five anti-Klan demonstrators were shot and killed, at least ten others were wounded and many witnesses bore the trauma of that day for years afterward. Although four news crews recorded the events as they unfolded, the police were absent from the scene. Yet the department had issued a parade permit to the anti-Klan demonstrators and were in regular contact with their paid informant in the Klan who helped organize the counter-demonstration.

Klan and neonazi shooters claimed self-defense and were acquitted by all-white juries in both a state and a federal criminal trial. A third, civil trial jury found the shooters as well as two Greensboro police officers and the Klan informant jointly liable for the wrongful death of one victim. On their behalf, the City of Greensboro paid damages of nearly $400,000 to the victim's widow and to two injured protestors.

Twenty-seven years have passed since the shootings, but emotions still run high in Greensboro when the 1979 events are mentioned. Is it worthwhile to disentangle the myths and reopen community discussion about the killings?

Former Mayor Carolyn Allen was one of the community members who thought it was worthwhile. The divided memories of Nov. 3, 1979 were a barrier to solving

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ills that continue to this day, she felt, ills such as community/police distrust, racism, and dire working conditions in local industries.

> In returning to the political scene here — just sort of gradually as months and years went by — I began to see that many of our racial difficulties were related to a lack of trust, and much of that all seemed to head back to the '79 events.

And surviving CWP demonstrators – including Dr. Marty Nathan, the widow of Mike Nathan, and Rev. Nelson Johnson, now director of the Beloved Community Center in Greensboro — strongly hoped that opening up the mythology would promote healing and progress.

So in 2001, residents of Greensboro — survivors, city leaders, religious leaders and others — embarked on an unprecedented grassroots effort to seek the truth and work for reconciliation around the events of November 3, 1979. With financial support from the Andrus Family Fund and advice from the International Center for Transitional Justice, the group decided to adapt the truth and reconciliation commission model used most notably in South Africa and Peru after oppressed groups took power. But Greensboro's effort was significantly different. First, unlike these national efforts, Greensboro's process was not initiated or endorsed by a governmental body. Second, the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission was mandated to examine the "context, causes, sequence and consequence" of one particular event rather than a pattern of human rights violations.

Third, unlike the South African Commission, the one in Greensboro did not have the power either to subpoena witnesses or to grant amnesty for crimes committed. This meant that the people who gave formal statements to the Commission — including Communist Worker Party demonstrators and their children, Klansmen and neonazis, police officers, former residents of the Morningside Homes housing project where it took place, attorneys and a judge involved in the related trials, city officials and many others — did so because of a desire to share their portion of the "truth" in a public setting rather than the carrot or stick of amnesty or subpoena power. In this setting, residents listened to neighbors they may never have spoken to before.

But like the national efforts, Greensboro created a panel which heard statements from many viewpoints, with the aim of creating an accurate collective memory of the traumatic event that in turn would help nurture reconciliation of the entire community.

Feelings about the events are shaped by a mix of truths, rumors, and lies.

In some ways, divisions around the events of November 3, 1979 are unique to Greensboro because they are related to its particular history and personalities. But the community response to Hurricane Katrina showed that America's pervasive racial and class disparities go beyond Greensboro. In the aftermath of both crises, citizens have the opportunity to examine our myths and illusions; we can either do something to rectify the truths that are illuminated, cling even more closely to the status quo, or even remain silent out of fear of speaking the truths we inherently understand.[1]

Conflicting Memories

The way one remembers 1979 seems to be connected to one's own experiences with the city of Greensboro and undoubtedly is influenced by one's race and class. For some, like Lewis A. Brandon, III, an African American civic leader who participated in the famous sit-ins at the whites-only lunch counter at Greensboro's Woolworths in 1960, the anti-Klan march was one of many challenges to the status quo in town:

> I don't know of any social change that occurred in this community without a struggle . . . That's the Greensboro I know. Change doesn't come because of the goodness of people in the community. People have to struggle. People have to fight to get change in this community.[2]

Others, like Dr. Mary Johnson, a local blogger who is white, do not see the 1979 events as having anything to do with the city itself and, therefore, feel that they are best forgotten. As she wrote on a local blog:

> As I have said before, the Greensboro I know and love and have experienced my whole life has NOTHING to do with the freakish aberration of one day in 1979 …. Greensboro is also the home of the Woolworth's sit-ins, and I daresay that is what people in San Francisco and Boston and Seattle and New York City would think of FIRST if someone would just let them. MANY RESIDENTS of Greensboro in 2006 are saying, PLEASE LET THEM.[3]

Feelings about the events are shaped by a mix of truths, rumors and lies. Those who see the events of 1979 as fitting into a larger pattern of repression of struggles for social justice have had their own myths. For years, before some publicly set this belief aside, Communist Workers Party survivors said the prosecution team in the state murder trial intentionally lost the case. Within the African American community, a rumor remained unchecked for twenty-six years: that a pregnant woman was shot and killed that day. While a pregnant woman, Frankie Powell, was shot, it was not a fatal wound.

Among those who see the shootings as an isolated incident with little to do with Greensboro, several myths circulate. For starters, one often-repeated story has it that the police were not present at the permitted march because they were confused about its starting point, yet the starting point was clearly stated on the permit application. The police even gave the Klan a copy of the parade route. Another part of this story suggests that the police never

realized that the Klan/neonazi caravan was on its way to challenge the marchers, yet an intelligence officer was following the caravan, and police had an informant among the Klansmen who helped organize the counter-protest.

A third myth presented all those involved in the shooting as out-of-towners, or dismissed the event as a shootout between two extremist groups. While some of those involved in the Klan and the CWP did reside outside of Greensboro, many, including the police department's paid Klan informant who organized the Klan/neonazi caravan, were residents of the city. This narrative also ignores the role of the police department, very much a part of the city of Greensboro, in allowing the shootings to take place.

One of the most pervasive myths viewed the shootings as having nothing to do with race and class relations in Greensboro. After all, three of the five people killed were highly educated white men (see box). Yet the Communist Workers Party was a multiracial group organizing Black and white workers for better working conditions in the local textile mills; they were challenging the status quo that kept white and Black workers divided. And despite knowing from an informant that the Klan was coming, the police department left unprotected those in the Black neighborhood where the rally took place – no surprise in a racially divided town that had been a longtime Ku Klux Klan hotbed in the 1960s.

Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Process

The first step in creating the Commission that took on these myths was for the initiating group — called the Greensboro Truth and Community Reconciliation Project — to craft its mandate, which began:

> There comes a time in the life of every community when it must look humbly and seriously into its past in order to provide the best possible foundation for moving into a future based on healing and hope. Many residents of Greensboro believe that for this city, the time is now.

The second step was to create a democratic selection process for the Commission that would examine the context, causes, sequence, and consequence of the events of November 3, 1979. The initiating group did this by inviting 17 organizations to appoint representatives to a selection panel. These organizations were chosen in the hopes that all Greensboro residents would feel represented by at least one of the appointing groups.

All of the organizations except for three — the police, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Sons of Confederate Veterans and Daughters of the Confederacy — accepted the invitation to appoint someone to the panel. Though the mayor was a vocal opponent to the truth and reconciliation process, he appointed a local judge to the selection panel, who was then chosen to be its chair.

The selection panel chose seven Commissioners, keeping in mind the town's racial, socioeconomic, religious and sexual diversity. Five lived and/or worked in Greensboro and included a community

Those Killed at the 1979 Communist Workers Party March in Greensboro

César Cauce was a Cuban immigrant who graduated *magna cum laude* from Duke University, where he was a campus leader in the anti-war movement. He sought to unionize Duke Hospital workers, supported a campaign to organize poultry workers at the Goldkist plant in Durham, and organized strike support for union struggles throughout North Carolina. He also traveled throughout the South, covering union struggles for the *Workers Viewpoint* newspaper.

While a student at Duke, **Dr. Mike Nathan** was an anti-war and civil rights activist. He organized and led a chapter of the Medical Committee for Human Rights, which fought for improved health care for poor people, and was a leader in a movement to send aid to liberation fighters who eventually toppled the apartheid system in what is now Zimbabwe. A specialist in child health, he treated sick children in a mountain clinic in Guatemala in 1972 and 1973, and in 1978 he had become the head pediatrician at Lincoln Community Health Center, the clinic that still serves Durham's poor African American children.

Bill Sampson was a student anti-war activist and president of his college student body. He received his Masters degree in Divinity from Harvard in 1971, then, as a medical student at the University of Virginia, organized health care workers to support the liberation struggles in southern Africa. He left medical school to work and organize in one of Cone Mills' Greensboro textile plants, where he built the union and focused on training new leaders. Before his death, the workers had chosen him to run for president of the local.

Sandi Smith was president of the student body and a founding member of the Student Organization for Black Unity (SOBU) at Greensboro's Bennett College. She was a community organizer for the Greensboro Association of Poor People (GAPP) and became a worker at the textile mill where she and others formed the Revolution Organizing Committee (ROC) to unionize the plant. She led a march of over 3,000 people in Raleigh to free the Wilmington 10, ten desegregation activists charged with arson and conspiracy and considered prisoners of conscience by Amnesty International. In her work at a Cone Mills textile plant, she battled sexual harassment, low wages, and unhealthy working conditions.

Dr. Jim Waller had for many years lent his expertise in medicine to poor people in need. He received his medical degree from the University of Chicago. In 1973, at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, Jim set up a clinic to aid American Indian Movement activists under siege by the FBI. When he moved to North Carolina to teach at Duke University Medical School, he coordinated Brown Lung screenings in the state's textile mills. He left medicine to organize in a rural Cone Mills textile plant, where, before he died, he had led a successful strike and been elected president of his union.

organizer, a college professor, a retired textile manager, a retired corporate attorney, and a minister. Another Commissioner — a community organizer who was once a city councilwoman and 2002 candidate for U.S. Senate — was from Durham, North Carolina, and the last was the executive director of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, based in Nyack, New York.

Over two years, the Commissioners engaged the community and conducted research. They interviewed community members, and examined both the voluminous paper trail created by the three trials and the heavily redacted local police and FBI records. By May 2006, the Commission had issued its 529-page report to the community. (The full report can be accessed at *www.greensborotrc.org*.)

Community Engagement, Race and Class

The Commissioners discovered that nearly everyone with any knowledge of 1979 and of the pending truth and reconciliation initiative had strong feelings about both. The only middle ground to be found was among those who knew nothing about either. Nor did the divisions fall neatly along racial lines.

There were white and Black people both in favor of and opposed to reexamining the events of November 3, 1979, but the reasons for the support and opposition were generally quite different. Through a door-to-door campaign in poor and working class neighborhoods, Commissioners and staff noticed that white people tended to understand the 1979 events as being acts of outsiders and having nothing to do with Greensboro. If they opposed the process, it was often because they saw no connection between 1979 and today and felt that the process unfairly presented the city in a negative light to the outside world.

Gorrell Pierce, a former Imperial Wizard of the Federated Knights of the Ku Klux Klan who was not present on November 3 but was involved in prior confrontations between the Communist Workers Party and the Klan, praised Greensboro for its history and suggested that the city should not feel ashamed about the 1979 events:

> The city of Greensboro can be proud of itself. And a lot of change happened here. The Continental Army laid an ass whooping on Cornwallis right down the road here when he went to Yorktown and surrendered. And I'm very proud of that. And we go right down here to Woolworth's, and that's where the civil rights movement began. Right there. Greensboro has a lot to be proud of. They needn't be ashamed of November 3. It was one of those things that happened and it was not orchestrated by the city of Greensboro to happen. It was not orchestrated by me and I don't think anybody on the other side, if they could turn the clock back, they'd change it too. But it happened. And I've had to live with it, I've thought about it every day of my life since then.[4]

The Greensboro community could have been more involved in rethinking the 1979 killings.

Some whites, including Pierce, did support the process, but often the value they saw in it was largely based on their hopes for reconciliation, which many felt was at odds with the goal of truth. John Young, a member of the originating task force and a leader in a local Quaker congregation, wrote about this tension after the report was released:

> Greensboro is an example that shows that if the reconciliation part and the healing part are not sufficiently nurtured at every stage of the process and if the broader community cannot be significantly engaged then what we have is not sufficiently aimed at both Truth and Reconciliation. If this Greensboro Commission had placed more emphasis on community reconciliation their public hearings and their report would be different.[5]

In their outreach, Commissioners and staff reported that African Americans tended to understand the events within a pattern of race and class disparities and oppression in Greensboro. For many African Americans, the events of November 3 and their aftermath were no surprise.

That said, there were still plenty of African Americans who were opposed to the Truth and Reconciliation process. For poor and working class African Americans, this opposition seemed to grow largely out of a sense of hopelessness that anything would really change, the need to focus limited resources on more immediate concerns, and even a fear that participating could result in retaliation from the police, the Klan, employers, or the Housing Authority. Richard Koritz, a white labor organizer, expressed this concern to the Commission and in the local newspaper:

> The GTRC process offers the poor and working poor "reconciliation" as a substitute for striving for some level of power. "Reconciliation" is a grand illusion that only serves the powers-that-be. … My opposition to the raising up of this defeat for the people that occurred on Nov. 3, 1979, is that it is a source of demoralization for the black community and the working people of this area in general, the very people who have more need than ever to stand up and fight for their rights.[6]

Overall, African-American supporters of the process tended to talk much more about the value of truth-telling than the longer-term goals of reconciliation. Ed Whitfield, a member of the originating group and vice-chair of the Commission's selection panel, described this tension in an interview:

> [T]ruth processes strike me as being useful movements from the standpoint of what I'm concerned with, which is social justice. Not just about telling the truth and not just about getting where everybody can hug each other and sing kum bayah and can't we all just get along? … so it's not about that. To me it's about kinda chipping away at a lie that I think prevents people from reaching their full potential in terms of their relationships with each other and even in terms of their growth individually as we're all out here engaged in the process of creating meaning in our lives.

These divisions played out in the local government arena as well. On April 19, 2005, after being presented with a petition signed by more than 5,000 Greensboro residents requesting that the city endorse the truth and reconciliation process, the Greensboro City Council voted, along racial lines, to oppose the effort.

The Commission's Findings

Listening to the divided community reactions to the truth and reconciliation process and similarly divided memories of the events of November 3 led the Commissioners not only to a better understanding of the truth behind the 1979 events — which the Commissioners found were woven through with issues of race and class — but also to a better grasp of the context within which the events took place and of their consequences.

Responding to those who claim the events had nothing to do with race, the Commissioners recalled labor organizer Si Kahn's public hearing statement in which he said, "Scratch the surface of any issue in the South and you will find race." They encouraged residents to view the 1979 events like a photograph's negative, as if they had been "racially reversed":

> Imagine a group of demonstrators is holding a demonstration against black terrorism in the affluent white community of Irving Park. A caravan of armed black terrorists is allowed to drive unobstructed to the parade starting point, and photos are taken by the police as demonstrators are shot dead. Most of the cars are then allowed to flee the scene, unpursued, even as they threatened neighborhood pedestrians by pointing shotguns through the windows. The defendants are tried and acquitted by an all-black jury. The first shots — fired by the blacks screaming, "Shoot the Crackers!" and "Show me a Cracker with guts and I'll show you a black man with a gun!" — are described by black defense attorneys and accepted by jurors as "calming shots." Meanwhile, the city government takes steps to block citizen protest of black terrorist violence including a curfew in the white neighborhood. The scenario is so unlikely as to be preposterous. Yet, in racial reverse, it is exactly what happened.[7]

Although the Commission placed the "heaviest burden of responsibility" on the Klan and neonazi members who went to the march with "malicious intent" and fired their weapons, the Commission also held the CWP to a high standard and found some fault for the events in its leaders planning the march through a poor Black neighborhood:

> The Commission finds that the [CWP] leadership was very naïve about the level of danger posed by their rhetoric and the Klan's propensity for violence, and they even dismissed concerns raised by their own members … Although the [CWP] members felt that they had fully engaged with the Morningside community, it is apparent that there were many residents who felt uninformed and did not want the "Death to the Klan" rally in their community. The demonstrators' protest issues were grounded in the community's economic and social concerns, but their politics and tactics were not.[8]

The Commission's strongest findings about responsibility for the shootings were reserved for the Greensboro Police Department, whose absence, the majority of the commissioners found, was the "single most important element that contributed to the violent outcome of the confrontation." The Commission, in some ways a microcosm of the larger community, was not immune from the divisions plaguing Greensboro; this difference in understandings was reflected and described in one of its findings regarding the police department:

> While nearly all Commissioners find sufficient evidence that some officers were deliberately absent, we also unanimously concur that the conclusions one draws from this evidence is likely to differ with one's life experience. Those in our community whose lived experience is of government institutions that fail to protect their interests are understandably more likely to see "conspiracy." Those accustomed to reliable government protection are more likely to see "negligence," or no wrongdoing on the part of law enforcement officers. We believe this is one reason the community is polarized in understanding this event.[9]

Lessons from Greensboro

As the first truth and reconciliation commission in the United States, the Greensboro process can serve as a model — in its success and challenges — for other communities considering commissions of their own.

The Commission is hopeful that Greensboro residents may someday embrace its recommendations: for instance, for the city government and police to apologize for their roles in the event, to create a citizen review committee of the police department, to investigate allegations of more recent corruption in the city, and to enact pro-labor policies like a living wage. It also issued a general call for residents to reflect on the way their actions support racial and economic privilege.

So far, the "reconciliation" aspect of the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation process has not been fully realized. In fact, because of some people's heightened aware-

ness of the history of the 1979 events and their context, the city seems more divided than ever.

Still, the process has generated a more accurate and rich account of the shootings, allowing many Greensboro residents to see them as more than just an isolated clash between extremist groups. It has given approximately 150 people a chance to share their statements with the Commission, an act many reported to be healing in itself, while facilitating personal reconciliation between several, such as Roland Wayne Wood, one of the neonazi shooters, and Signe Waller, widow of Jim Waller, who was killed that day. And perhaps most powerfully, it provides an example for other U.S. communities of a group of people who have the courage to seek justice in the spirit of reconciliation around a great wrong even though police officers and other members of government were implicated.

Yet the community was not involved to the extent it could have been in Greensboro and this challenge might provide useful lessons for other communities.

Reflecting on Greensboro's truth and reconciliation process, Ed Whitfield, a member of the originating group and vice-chair of the Commission Selection Panel, wrote:

> The failure to mobilize the grass roots community in its thousands to go beyond signing a petition has been raised as a weakness of our process. While there is always more and better work to do in this regard we are facing a community which is fundamentally engaged in the immediate struggle for survival and which does not always spontaneously make the connection between survival now and systems of oppression that were factors in the 1979 incident and its aftermath.[10]

Many of those involved have concluded that the community would have been more engaged if the effort had been connected right up front to present-day issues such as education or police accountability.

Others have criticized the Commission for failing to involve city officials from 1979 or to more effectively engage the current city council. Both challenges were related to an ongoing struggle about whom to engage and how. Whitfield reflected on this tension when he wrote:

> There are two divergent paths for Truth and Reconciliation processes: one toward seeking truth, giving voice to the voiceless, comforting the downtrodden and confronting the powers that be. The other path is toward avoiding confrontation, muting dissent, glossing over differences, appealing to the broadest possible cultural base and ultimately excusing injustice in the name of reconciling the community while supporting the status quo and those powers that depend on it.[11]

In order to engage those who were otherwise disinclined to share their views, the Commission indeed appealed to "the broadest possible cultural base" through less formal activities such as community dialogues, socials, and internet publications.

Although the Commission was set up to be independent even from those — like the Communist Workers Party survivors — who were in the group which gave it life, many in the community were concerned that the survivors would unduly influence the Commission's findings. The Commission repeatedly found itself explaining its independence and distancing itself from its initiating body. This created tension between the originating group and the Commission, but that distance helped secure testimony from the police, Klan, neonazis, and others who probably would have remained silent otherwise.

But Whitfield's first path, that of "seeking truth, giving voice to the voiceless, comforting the downtrodden and confronting the powers that be," was the path of choice at most critical moments where a decision was required. It is on that path that the Greensboro process has seen the most success. If the Greensboro experience inspires any hope for other communities, it comes from the power of those who are traditionally silenced sharing their stories of violence and fear within a democratic process they organized themselves, and against the disapproval of the local government and other powerful community members.

Like Hurricane Katrina, the truth and reconciliation process in Greensboro opened up a space in which even the most privileged in town were engaged — willingly or not — in a dialogue about race and class disparities. It remains to be seen whether meaningful social, political, or economic changes will grow from this dialogue. We are now in a time when some call on governments and other institutions to apologize for slavery, Jim Crow laws, and other symptoms of racism, and others, like Virginia state delegate Frank Hargrove, call on Black citizens to "get over it." A grassroots truth and reconciliation process is a promising tool for creating the space for engaging everyone in these difficult discussions without having to wait for another national tragedy to force us to do so. ■

End Notes

[1] University of Chicago professor Michael Dawson found that 90 percent of African Americans and only 38 percent of whites think Katrina showed that racial inequities are still a problem in the country. Furthermore, 84 percent of African Americans compared with 20 percent of whites believed that the federal government's response would have been quicker if the victims had been predominantly white. Michael Dawson, "After the Deluge: Publics and Publicity in Katrina's Wake." *DuBois Review* v3, n.1, 2006: 239-249.

[2] Lewis Brandon Public Hearing Statement, Greensboro Truth anad Reconciliation Commission, July 15, 2005.

[3] Dr. Mary Johnson, comment to "Apology," www.edcone.com, posted 6/24/06.

[4] Gorrell Pierce Public Hearing Statement, Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, July 16, 2005.

[5] John Young commenting in response to "More from the Truth Commission Convention," *The Lex Files* blog, *Greensboro News & Record*, July 10, 2006. http://blog.news-record.com/staff/lexblog/archives/2006/07/more_from_the_t.html

[6] Richard Koritz, "Reconciliation serves the status quo," Letter to the Editor, *Greensboro News & Record*, October 7, 2005. http://blog.news-record.com/staff/letters/archives/2005/10/reconciliation_1.html.

[7] Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission Final Report, pg. 381

[8] GTRC Final Report Executive Summary, pgs. 7 & 21

[9] Ibid, pg. 10.

[10] Ed Whitfield, Lessons from the Greensboro, NC, Truth and Reconciliation Process (self-published), March 13, 2006.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Greensboro Truth and Community Reconciliation Project, http://www.gtcrp.org/memory.asp, accessed January 1, 2007.