

PEOPLE FOR CHANGE

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Press Release

Prince George's Coalition of New Leaders Travel to Jena to Seek Justice



The Prince George's County trip to Jena, LA in support of the Jena 6 was a huge success. In just a short time, we raised \$13,500, secured two buses and took over 75 people on this historic trip where we showed our support for the Jena 6 families and participated in a movement for civil rights and justice. We are especially grateful to all who helped us financially, sent their prayers and who were present for our safe departure and return. And, for the many who could not make it, we represented all Prince Georgians.

We named our trip the FREEDOM BUS RIDE TO JENA, LA. The organizers and fundraisers for the trip include Bob Ross, Surrattsville High school PTSA, Sandra Pruitt of People for Change, and James Goodwin of Goombay Adventures. As leaders in the County, we mobilized forces and quickly planned this important journey.

The purpose of the trip was to join others across the nation in support of a rally for a call to injustice of six black teens in Jena, LA punished harshly and unfairly for a school fight. On our buses were county leaders, parents, PTA members, NAACP members, SCLC members, political candidates, high school and college students, seniors, business owners and a pastor. The age group ranged from 6 – 70 years old all with many talents that include reporters, photographers, event planners, videographers, attorneys, broker, builder, technology consultants, nonprofit leaders, and a former teacher.

It was a long journey traveling 24 hours each way. We left at 2:00am on Wednesday morning aboard a very comfortable bus, equipped with a sound system, flat screens for movies and two bus drivers for each bus. And, special thanks to Bob Ross's mother-in-law for sending us off with fried chicken, ham, and rolls.

On our journey we made several stops, listened to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. speeches, enjoyed short sermons delivered by Pastor Sinclair Grey that moved and motivated us and were also interviewed by a reporter to share our views about why we were traveling to Jena and what we hoped to accomplish. In addition, we enjoyed movies, great conversations, networking, sharing short stories, and even a few games of bid whist and spades—we truly bonded on this trip. On one of the stops we took a group picture of both buses something to remind us of our FREEDOM BUS RIDE to JENA.

On the way going, we stopped in Jackson, MS and stayed the night before departing at 3:30am in the morning in route to Jena. We took the back roads and arrived in Jena at 6:45am while listening to the Michael Baisden show and pulling up a few laptops to keep abreast of the itinerary for the day. We then traveled to Alexandria, a town about 30 minutes outside of Jena, only to learn that buses were now in route to Jena to park and unload. We then headed back to Jena, just in time to see the hundreds of buses pulling into this small town. It was exciting to see our black sisters and brothers all dressed in black with varied T-shirt designs to show support for the Jena 6. Our buses parked in the Jena Elementary school parking lot and we then walked down the main street to the courthouse where the rally was being held. That day, all the stores and businesses were closed—some boarded up and/or paper covering on the

windows. The town was very clean, equipped with a bank, supermarket, Dollar General, Pop-eyes, Subway, tile store, City Hall, a fairly modern elementary school and a dilapidated Jena High school.

As it got closer to 9:00am, the town was overwhelmed with all the bus loads of people coming in. State and local police, some in cars, on foot, on motorcycles, and helicopters were out in full force. And, we were not able to get any calls in or out on our cell phones while in Jena. As traffic started to pick up, many had long waits before they could get into Jena, and it was reported that over 100 buses were not able to get into the town that morning. Black people were everywhere and from just about every major city in the US. They traveled by plane, bus, car and foot. We talked and greeted many people along the crowded streets, sidewalks, and staging area.

The rally gathering and momentum exuberated a movement like you have never seen before. Many young people were a part of this movement taking place not just for the Jena 6 in Louisiana but for other Jena 6 incidents occurring all over the nation. Side marches were occurring and people were shouting everywhere "Free Mychal Bell", No Justice No Peace! As speaker after speaker lamented their remarks, and their disappointment of how this matter was handled, the crowd became more excited but the event remained peaceful.

While the stores and businesses were closed, a few local black vendors fired up their grills and deep frying pans. We tasted Louisiana fried fish, chicken, sausage, homemade potato salad, lemonade and punch while enjoying warm weather with an occasional cool breeze. It was also good to be off the bus.

On the way going and coming back, it wasn't long before the many personalities of the leaders came out. We discussed civil right issues, politics, education, crime, leadership, economic empowerment, mentoring our youth, voter education, and why we as a people seem to meet all the time, identify the problems but never develop an action plan. As a group, we decided we needed to harness this energy and take our ideas back to Prince George's County. We discussed the lack of leadership from our politicians and other leaders and how we could be

effective. This was definitely a time of reflection and an opportunity to revolutionize change in Prince George's County. One suggestion was that there needs to be a march on education to free our children from the school system.

As the event wound down and the people began to gather on their buses everyone was asking what next? What do we do if they do not free Mychal Bell? What are we doing when incidents of Jena 6 occur in our cities and towns? What are we doing when our leaders, the school system, our local government, the economy, or the legal system fails us? We can not depend on our current leaders--we must take on that role because we too are leaders!

We ended with agreeing to form a coalition of the new leaders in Prince George's County to address those concerns. We realized that we are a part of a movement and it is imperative to mobilize and position ourselves to work collectively at the grassroots level and change the way business is done in Prince George's County.

We plan to meet over the next few weeks to do a debriefing of the trip and develop an action plan on addressing a number of issues in Prince George's County.

We invite you to join us. Anyone interested in the Prince George's Coalition of New Leaders, please contact: Sandy Pruitt, People for Change, (301) 808-1492.