

Bryan Stevenson, the author of “Just Mercy”, is a black man whose early formal education began in Delaware, in segregated schools, and finished with a law degree from Harvard Law School. While at Harvard he realized that correcting inequities in the criminal justice system would be his life’s work. Early in his career he established the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) in Montgomery, Alabama, with the goal of helping Prisoners on Death Row obtain justice.

“Just Mercy”, published in 2014, documents many Death Row case studies, all appalling to read. I’ve summarized just one for you today.

In 1986 an 18-year-old white woman was murdered in Monroeville, Alabama. Six months later police had no leads. Suddenly, Walter McMillian, Walter for short, who had no prior criminal history, emerged as the primary suspect. Walter was a 45-year-old black man who was known and liked in the community. However, he had an affair with a white woman, which became well known in Monroeville, shortly before the murder took place. Walter went from someone who had an interracial affair, to someone who might be capable of murdering a white woman. He was arrested, held for six months on “death row” before his trial, then tried, convicted and sentenced to die in the electric chair in a trial that lasted only 1 ½ days. How could this happen?

Here is what happened:

---First, the court-appointed defense counsel was inept. Later on, he was disbarred for incompetence;

---the Judge allowed almost unlimited challenges in selecting the jury. An almost all-white jury was the result;

--- An inmate serving time for a lesser crime accused Walter in court, of murdering the victim. (It was later learned he received a reduced sentence and cash for his testimony);

---Three witnesses popped up during the pre-trial phase to testify against Walter that they had seen his truck at the murder site. (Subsequently, well after the trial, these witnesses confessed they had lied and were paid off by the Prosecution);

---the jury ignored three black witnesses who testified that Walter was at a church event at the time of the murder. (There were about 50 church members at that event who would have testified, if called);

---Finally, the trial judge overrode the jury's sentencing verdict, life in prison, and sentenced Walter to death by electrocution. (Violation of law).

Bryan Stevenson took over the defense for the appeals phase, where he proved that all the State's witnesses had lied on the stand, the prosecution had illegally suppressed evidence, and the judge had illegally changed the jury's sentence. All appeals were denied, until finally Walter's conviction was overturned by the Alabama Court of Criminal Appeals in 1993.

Walter McMillian was released in 1993 after spending 6 years on death row for a crime he did not commit, in a trial that should not have happened. As of the publication date of "Just Mercy" Bryan Stevenson and his Equal Justice Initiative Office had freed 135 innocent people from Death Row! Just two weeks ago Bryan Stevenson was awarded a "National Humanities Medal" by President Biden for his accomplishments, while raising national awareness of injustices still occurring in our legal system.

However, we can't delude ourselves. So long as Racism is still entrenched in American culture, real progress toward truth and equal justice for all seems out of reach.