

# RACIALLY CHARGED CASE JOLTS STUDENTS

By DON STACOM | Courant Staff Writer *September 21, 2007*

BRISTOL - About 1,500 miles from the tiny town where the racially charged Jena Six protest was held Thursday, students at St. Paul Catholic High School were wearing black ribbons in class to demonstrate anger at what they say is the most blatant display of racism they've seen.

"There's so much injustice, we've all felt horrible about it," 15-year-old Leah Maier said. "I understand there are other race crimes, but this is the most significant one. And because these people are our age, it tugged a different string."

Student Jenny Moran, also 15, said most St. Paul students were shocked after learning about the Jena, La., controversy in their classes last week.

"I didn't think things like that still went on today. You read about it in history, but you don't think it's still happening," Moran said Thursday afternoon.

Sociology teacher Regina Conner and English teacher Roberta McGuire read news stories about the Jena case to their classes last Friday as part of a schoolwide goal to discuss themes about tolerance during the year.

The St. Paul students were incensed to hear that at least five of six black teenagers in Jena originally were charged with attempted murder in the beating of a white student, while some white students in Jena were suspended but not prosecuted for hanging nooses on a tree at Jena's high school.

McGuire said students in her honors American literature class suggested sending letters of support to the Jena Six Defense Committee. She gave class members the choice of writing such a letter or doing an unrelated writing project. Twenty-three of the 25 students wrote letters and sent them to Louisiana on Monday, McGuire said.

"It's great as a teacher when you can open their eyes to a lot of issues, when kids can apply what they've learned and take thinking to a higher level," she said.

"It took on a life of its own," Conner said.

In Jena on Thursday, thousands of people - many wearing all black - protested how the school and judicial systems dealt with the racial strife at their high school. St. Paul students wore thin black ribbons on their shirts in school Thursday to symbolize their support for the protest.

"The black kids weren't 100 percent right, but they saw the school and their school board was against them. These [white] kids said the nooses were just a prank, but they looked like a threat to me," 16-year-old Mike Chase said. "What the white kids did didn't get physical, but mentally and emotionally it did twice as much damage."

"It's 2007. It's time for this to end," said Laura Lindsley, 16.

St. Paul has about 270 students from across central Connecticut; about 86 percent of them are white. Maier said she believes St. Paul students would be just as outraged if white youths were the target of injustice.

"I just want a level playing field," she said. "Either way, this would be a hate crime. It should still be equal, no matter who it was against."

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