

A Massacre Survivor Reflects on the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission

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The Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission (GTRC), the first of its kind in the United States, published its report on May 25, 2006. Will this project succeed in establishing some basic truth about the 1979 Greensboro Massacre? Can it serve as a model for other such projects in the United States?

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On November 3, 1979, Ku Klux Klansmen and American Nazis opened fire on union organizers and civil rights activists in Greensboro, North Carolina, killing five close friends of mine. We were black and white radical activists who had deep roots in the civil rights, Black Power, antiwar, and women's liberation movements. In the 1970s we became union organizers in textile mills and hospitals. Many of us, myself included, were members of the Communist Workers Party. On that fateful day, we wanted to protest the 1979 reemergence of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) in areas of North Carolina in which union drives were in progress. We planned a spirited march through Greensboro, followed by a conference. Instead, the KKK and Nazis attacked us as we were gathering to march; they killed Jim Waller, Sandi Smith, Bill Sampson, Michael Nathan, and Cesar Cauce, who were all dynamic and dedicated leaders in their twenties and thirties. Gunshots wounded ten others,

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including my husband Paul Bermanzohn, who was shot in the head and the arm, permanently paralyzing his left side.

Twenty-six years later, a Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission has reinvestigated these murders. Why a Greensboro truth commission? The basic answer is *government involvement* in the 1979 murders. Officials covered up the role of various state institutions in two criminal trials, leading to unanswered questions that have polarized the Greensboro community for a generation.

State Involvement and Cover-Up in the Greensboro Massacre

Trials, investigative reporting, government documents, and TV videotape have established the following facts concerning state responsibility for the massacre. The Greensboro Police Department (GPD) gave a copy of our police parade permit to the Klansman Edward Dawson, who was on the GPD payroll as an informant. Dawson had also been a Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) informant in the sixties and seventies, and he reported that armed Klansmen planned to come to Greensboro on November 3 to both his GPD supervisor and his former FBI agent supervisor. Under the direction of the GPD, Dawson recruited and organized the KKK to attack us. On November 3, 1979, using the information on our police permit, he led the Klan-Nazi caravan to where we were gathering. In addition, a federal agent of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) named Bernard Butkovich pushed the Nazis to join the Klan in the attack that day. As the Klan/Nazis gathered, formed a caravan, and drove toward us, two Greensboro plain-clothes officers observed them and repeatedly radioed headquarters, noting the KKK and Nazis' numerous guns. Instead of stopping the Klan and Nazis, or even warning us, the GPD headquarters pulled all officers out of the area, including those assigned to protect us, and sent them to an early lunch. In sum, the GPD instigated and facilitated the attack with the knowledge of federal agents in the FBI and the ATF.¹

Yet in two out of the three trials that arose from November 3, the courts acquitted the Klan and Nazi gunmen. Both a state murder trial and a federal civil rights trial failed to investigate the role of police or federal agents. The government was more concerned with covering up its role than with prosecuting the gunmen. Prosecutors, as well as the Klan-Nazi defense lawyers, kept the truth buried, and the juries acquitted the murderers. Even the TV videotape of the murders failed to influence this outcome. In contrast, we victims brought a third trial, a civil one, where for the first time our own lawyers represented us in court. We focused our meager resources on revealing the government involvement and achieved a partial victory. A jury found three GPD employees jointly liable with the Klan and Nazis for one wrongful death. The city of Greensboro paid a \$300,000 settlement for its police department, the Klan, and the Nazis. Despite these three trials, no Klansman or Nazi ever served prison time.

For decades the City of Greensboro has consistently denied any wrongdoing.

The powers that be continued to blame us, the victims, for the deaths of our friends. They scapegoated us as communists, as if we were despicable and subhuman. As the district attorney stated at a news conference one month after the murders, most people in Greensboro “feel the communists got . . . ‘about what they deserved.’”²

Can a truth commission operate successfully in the context of Greensboro? A key factor in every truth-seeking project is the commission’s relationship to the state. Usually a truth commission is established after a new government replaces a former regime, often following years of upheaval and state repression. The new regime tries to use the commission to help it consolidate public support. In the United States, however, there has been no change in state power. In Greensboro, as in the country as a whole, those who wield power are basically the next generation of the same group that exercised power twenty-five years ago. Some of the same individuals in power in 1979 continue to be influential today. Moreover, in Greensboro, all levels of government have consistently covered up their involvement in the events of November 3, 1979.

Seeking Justice

For survivors, a truth commission represents another chance for justice. People never forget the murder of their loved ones. In 1979, four women lost their husbands, a baby lost her father, two adolescents lost their stepfather, and we all lost close friends. For a generation, we survivors have sought ways to bring out the truth, holding commemorations, writing books, giving speeches, and encouraging reporters, playwrights, and documentary filmmakers to tell the story. We have built two long-term institutions. One is the Greensboro Justice Fund, directed for ten years by Dale Sampson, the widow of Bill Sampson, and for the past fifteen years by Marty Nathan, the widow of Michael Nathan. The other is the Beloved Community Center in Greensboro, directed by the Reverend Nelson Johnson, which organizes for decent education, housing, unionization, against police brutality, and keeps alive the memory of those killed in 1979. A leader in the African American community since the 1960s, Johnson was stabbed by a Klansman during the 1979 massacre.³

In 2000, we learned about the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), which advises truth-seeking projects around the world, based on the experience of South Africa and other nations.⁴ The Greensboro Justice Fund and the Beloved Community Center invited the ICTJ to guide a truth-seeking project.

An Experiment in Grassroots Democracy

The Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission took years to create. Before the commission was formed, broad-based community support needed to be organized to carry out the steps to build a commission process. Under the direction of the ICTJ’s Lisa Magarrell, the Greensboro Truth and Community Reconciliation Project was founded in 2002, and called the “Project” to distinguish it from the

“Commission.” A former Greensboro mayor, respected clergy both black and white, academics in local colleges and universities, African American city council representatives, labor unions, community activists, and survivors became actively involved in the project.

Through many community discussions in 2002–3, the project reached out to a wide variety of political, religious, and educational institutions, as well as community organizations. The project developed a mandate and selection process to name commissioners, and in early 2003 published this mandate in the Greensboro newspapers. The mandate stated that any resident of Greensboro or the surrounding Guilford County could nominate commissioners. The project invited seventeen groups to choose a representative to sit on the selection committee to participate in choosing who would serve as the seven commissioners among those nominated. Fourteen groups selected representatives including Greensboro’s mayor, five college presidents, five college student governments, the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, the Central Labor Council, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, African American churches, white churches, the Jewish community, the Muslim community, and community organizations. The three groups that refused to send representatives were the GPD, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Sons and Daughters of the Confederacy.⁵

The selection committee reviewed approximately seventy nominations, and in late spring 2004, selected seven people to serve as commissioners. Those chosen to be commissioners were Cynthia Brown, the consultant for nonprofit groups; Patricia Clark, the executive director of the Fellowship of Reconciliation; Muktha Jost, a professor at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University; Angela Lawrence, a counselor and community activist; Robert Peters, a retired corporate attorney; the Reverend Mark Sills, the director of Faith Action International House; and Barbara Walker, a retired corporate manager. These commissioners were diverse, including three African American women, two white men, one white woman, and one woman from India. Five were residents of Greensboro, one came from Durham, North Carolina, and one from Nyack, New York. They brought a wide variety of professional and life experiences to a challenging task. The commissioners worked on a part-time basis, volunteering their time. Funds from private donations and foundation grants allowed the commissioners to hire a small staff, including an executive director, a research director, a communications director, a public hearing coordinator, and an administrator.

On June 12, 2004, the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission was formally seated in a ceremony attended by five hundred people. The commissioners and staff put out a call for statements and received testimony from 150 people (55 of these individuals gave statements at public hearings, and 95 people gave statements to the commissioners privately, 12 of which were confidential). The commission also researched legal documents and historical materials.

The Greensboro process has focused locally, yet at the same time it has been part of an international phenomenon of truth-seeking. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who headed up the pacesetting South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, visited North Carolina in 2003 and 2005, meeting with both the project and the commissioners. The Reverend Bongani Finca, a commissioner on the South African truth commission, and Eduardo Gonzalez, a staff member of the Peru truth commission, have also visited Greensboro and given advice and support.

The Public Hearings

The commissioners held six days of hearings over a three-month period in 2005. The testimony came from every different viewpoint. Among the first speakers was the Ku Klux Klan leader Virgil Griffin, who rode in the caravan and denounced the hearings. The Klan leader's arguments sounded strangely like those of Greensboro's political elite. A few hours later, Gorrell Pierce, another Klansman, testified in a more folksy style, attempting to present the KKK as a benign group. Neither Griffin nor Pierce said anything much different than they had twenty-six years earlier. They did not offer any new information and seemed to come because of public pressure, indicating that the GTRC was having an impact. Asked why only anti-Klan activists had been killed, Griffin stated that "God guided the Klan's bullets." Griffin's statement was published in newspapers across the country, receiving more coverage than any other aspect of the GTRC to that point.

Other public testimony came from Judge James Long, who had presided over the 1980 state criminal trial that had acquitted the Klan and Nazis, as well as three Klan-Nazi defense lawyers. None of the commanding GPD commanding officers testified; three police officers, on duty on November 3, spoke at a public hearing, but all stated they were not officially representing the police department. Community people from the traumatized neighborhood where the massacre occurred bore witness to the impact of the events on their families and community. A wide variety of individuals from academic, civic, and community organizations shared what they knew.

Ten survivors were invited to speak, including three widows and three people who were wounded, including my husband Paul, who talked about living with bullet fragments still in his brain. Many survivors attended the hearings, and it was extremely emotional for us. Our spirits soared when the survivors spoke and dropped during the statements by those who had killed us or covered up the murders.

It became clear that the commissioners were under great pressure to continue the whitewash of November 3. At the first hearing, I felt the commissioners failed to ask serious questions of the Klansmen. I worried that the hearings would become just a "he said, she said" procedure, without the commissioners assessing the veracity of the statements. Fortunately in subsequent hearings, the commissioners played a stronger role.

In every hearing, the commissioners clearly recognized that five lives were lost that day. At the beginning and end of every day of hearings, there were eighty-eight seconds of silence, symbolizing the eighty-eight seconds of gunfire that had killed the five. In the first row of the audience, five chairs held roses, marking the presence of those who died.

Testifying

The commission asked me to testify on August 26, sandwiched between two other survivors: Floris Weston, whose husband Cesar Cauce had been killed in the massacre, and Nelson Johnson, who had been stabbed. We spoke at the end of a long day of testimony by those who opposed us, including the judge who acquitted the Klansmen and police officers who repeated the same cover-up we had heard for twenty-six years. Decades of anger welled up inside me.

As I sat down at the testimony table, I noticed the hundreds of people in the audience. I opened my mouth, and my memories of that day poured out, a flashback of the murders that I have relived countless times. I described seeing the caravan, hearing the racial epithets, hoping the Klansmen would just drive by, seeing the guns, hearing the shots, and then finding my dear friends bleeding to death. As I finished recounting my story, I was only vaguely aware of the commissioners and the audience. I noticed how quiet everyone was—they were listening to me. I have given many speeches, sharing this flashback with groups large and small. But for me, this was the greatest speaking experience ever. Speaking to a Greensboro audience of memories pent up for twenty-six years, my feelings soared. In contrast to the perpetrators, I had nothing to hide; I could only tell what I had seen and knew to be true. And with the Greensboro public, the commissioners were listening and taking the responsibility to sort through all the conflicting testimony and determine what happened. I was part of a process that would have an outcome.

My testimony focused on the role of the GPD in the massacre, and I concluded

The Greensboro Massacre happened because of the behavior of top commanders in the police department. . . . There are many unanswered questions about other government agencies and officials on the federal, state, and local level. I do not think the police could have acted in isolation of other government officials. But regardless of whether these questions will ever be answered—there is *no doubt about the outrageous, illegal, criminal acts of the GPD commanders.*

And where is the GPD in relationship to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission? Do the police brass think that by avoiding this process people will just ignore their role in the massacre? I believe their failure to come before the Commission points to them continuing to hide the truth.⁶

Although state political repression can involve many institutions, local police often prove central to the violence. The Greensboro Massacre is a case in point.

Greensboro Police Scandal, 2006

Lies covered up tend to grow. Hidden criminal acts by police officials festered inside the GPD for decades. In January 2006, they burst forth into a full-fledged police scandal that has divided the GPD, and the city of Greensboro, along racial lines. A black police officer found a listening and tracking device on his car in late 2005. A short time later, a black book with the names of 114 African American citizens of Greensboro, nineteen of them police officers, was found in the trunk of the assistant police chief's car. This occurred after the Truth Commission had concluded its hearings with no input from the GPD leadership, questions about the role of the police brass in the massacre still lingering. In January 2006, with vivid evidence of racist harassment against black officers and community members, the city council fired the chief of police and the assistant police chief, both white. The press talked about the chief and assistant chief being part of a "rogue group" in the department, but this was not just a rogue group—it was men at the top of the local chain of command. In April, forty black GPD officers (half of the African Americans on the city police force) filed a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as the first step in a civil lawsuit against the department.⁷ There is evidence that this criminal element has existed for decades, back at least to 1979. It seems to be a longtime racist group that strove to control the GPD by preventing black police leadership from developing. A direct connection to the 1979 massacre appears likely; one officer implicated in the 1979 cover-up was the same man who owns the private detective agency that in 2005 attached the listening device to the black officer's car.⁸ The police scandal is ongoing, with no end in sight.

The Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report

On May 26, 2006, the GTRC released a 532-page report. Based on thorough research of all available sources, the report carefully weighs sharply-conflicting testimonies. It analyzes the events of November 3 in context of local history, including our involvement in the black liberation movement and labor organizing during the 1960s and 1970s. It discusses what is known about the preparation for that day by the GPD, the FBI, and the ATF. It also covers the aftermath of the murders, including the trials and the press coverage.

The commission's findings are comprehensive. Most important, they find the police culpable for failing to provide safety for the protesters or the residents of the community where the Klan attacked. In great detail, the report describes the GPD's awareness of the Klan caravan's movements, and their failure to take action to protect people. The report's conclusion states that a majority of the commissioners believe that "among *some* in the [Greensboro Police] department, there was

intentionality to fail to provide adequate protection,” and the commissioners name six officers who were decision makers that day.⁹ The findings criticize the city’s scapegoating of the victims and the failure of the court system to find the killers guilty. The commissioners also criticize us for violent language, a point with which many of the survivors agree.¹⁰

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report has made a significant impact in Greensboro. At a May 25 ceremony, eighty local community groups received copies of the report and promised to study it and to hold public meetings to discuss it. Greensboro’s truth-seeking process can serve as a model for other similar projects in the country. Atrocities have occurred in many cities and communities across the nation—lynchings, race riots, police brutality, and other forms of political murders. People from a number of areas have visited Greensboro to investigate developing their own truth-seeking projects. There is great potential for such endeavors where there exists a dedicated core of people with deep roots in a community, who are willing to take on an intense and time-consuming effort.

Notes

1. For more details and a full documentation of sources of information, see Sally A. Bermanzohn, *Through Survivors’ Eyes: From the Sixties to the Greensboro Massacre* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003); and Signe Waller, *Love and Revolution: A Political Memoir* (Lanham, MD: Rowman Littlefield, 2002).
2. “District Attorney Says He Is Caught in the Middle of a No-Win Situation,” *Greensboro Daily News*, December 12, 1979.
3. For more information on the Greensboro Justice Fund, see www.gjf.org (accessed August 10, 2006); and on the Beloved Community Center, see www.belovedcommunitycenter.org (accessed August 10, 2006).
4. For more on the International Center for Transitional Justice, see www.ictj.org (accessed August 10, 2006).
5. Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, pamphlet (2005), 8. For more information, see www.greensborotrc.org (accessed August 10, 2006).
6. All testimonies from the hearings can be found on the GTRC Public Hearings DVD, available at www.greensborotrc.org (accessed August 10, 2006).
7. See the *Greensboro News and Record*, January 9–April 22, 2006.
8. Nelson Johnson, letter to Mayor Keith Holliday and the Greensboro City Council, March 10, 2006.
9. GTRC, Final Report, May 25, 2006, 301; available at www.greensborotrc.org (accessed August 10, 2006).
10. *Ibid.*, 375–76.

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