

Decatur, Illinois • Sunday, November 14, 1999 CENTRAL ILLINOIS A3

# RACIAL: Leaders hope divide can be mended

Continued from A1

board. They're people — just like us — who live and work in this community," Arndt said.

Twenty years ago, there were many problems in Decatur," he said. "There were fights taking place in the schools. There was racial tension. And the Black gang gained strength. Decatur at that time did not want to recognize that the city was changing."

Although Rainbow/PUSH and others addressed many of the current issues that don't involve race, consider these facts:

■ Arndt and the majority of the seven members of the board are white. One of two African-Americans on the seven-member board at the time of the incident did not vote on the expulsion and the other voted against them.

■ The seven expelled students are African-American.

■ The vast majority of the marchers on Nov. 7 were African-American.

■ Very few exceptions, most African-Americans who have gone on the record are against the school board's decision, while many whites are reported it.

■ Mark Arthur, field director with the national office of Rainbow/PUSH, disputes claims that there is a racial issue.

"Our press releases from the very beginning have said that Rev. Jackson is appealing on behalf of the students. He has not said that the organization has not made the race of the students a point," he said.

"We need to do things to get people back to a level of understanding," he said.

Allen said support from whites for Jackson on the expulsion issue is greater than it was a month ago, but it has not been ignored by the media.

"The Rainbow Coalition is a whole lot of colors," he said.

Arndt said the issue previously on the agenda was small. He fears that the Pandora's box of race has been reopened, even though the principal players have

## JACKSON:

## Security disrupts some events

Continued from A1

A Ku Klux Klan unit has announced it will demonstrate today in a different location from the Rainbow/PUSH march.

White supremacists have been on the fringes of this issue from the start. The Man of the World Church of the Creator, has announced he will step up recruitment in the Decatur area, and literature from his organization has appeared on the lawns of homes in several Decatur neighborhoods last week.

Macon County Sheriff Roger Walker said security measures are being directed by the Decatur Police Department.

Lat. James Cherivino of Decatur police said the only notable update on the marches is that the Rainbow/PUSH march is expected to end at MacArthur High School.

Shawn Meeks said his march will begin at 3 p.m. at Eldorado Street and Martin Luther King Jr. Drive. Marchers then will head east on Eldorado to 16th Street.

A man claiming to be a national spokesman for the International Knights of the Ku Klux Klan said KKK members would gather between 2 and 4 p.m. today at the Cook County Pavilion Park. The march would end at the civic center, a coach.

Both marches have disrupted some weekend sporting events. At the Decatur Civic Center, travel league hockey games against Naperville and Champaign, schools in the Sycamore and today, respectively, have been canceled, according to Heather Maines, student beverage director for the civic center and a coach.

Anyone participating in a march up Decatur's main drag, including 75 degree Saturday — with several Central Illinois cities teetering on record highs — but the temperature was to plunge today by nearly 20 degrees.

Weather forecasters are calling for partly sunny skies and temperatures in the mid- to high-50s.

... black and white leaders have a responsibility to say this issue hasn't changed our relationship.'

— Phillip Sands,  
Decatur City Council member

expressed no desire to do so.

On Saturday, a leader in the African-American community warned of the same thing, but said long-standing injustice against blacks must be acknowledged.

Jeanelle Norman, president of the Decatur Branch of the NAACP, said if the dispute is not resolved soon, the situation could become further aggravated.

"There are underlying issues that have to be acknowledged," Norman said. "Blacks are tired of going to the store and being followed around as if they're going to steal."

Speaking at a breakfast conference at the Unitarian Fellowship of Decatur, 3735 N. Macon, Norman said she said the expulsion debate has ignited dormant racial frustration for the city's African-American residents.

She said the NAACP and "the lily-white Chamber of Commerce" for taking sides in the dispute between the school board and Jesse Jackson's Operation PUSH.

She specifically referred to announcements of support for the march by Decatur City Council member Bert Stockard and Mayor Terry Hawley.

"They [Hawley and Stockard] showed up as a mediator," Norman said. "They're not convincing people that everybody won something."

"It's like the lead [in] that can convince people that everybody won something," Sands said. "And black and white, you can convince people that everybody won something."

Norman concluded her speech with a call for the city to lay out a community-wide strategic plan for the future after the expulsion dispute is settled.

While the Chamber of Commerce for Decatur and Macon

County had not taken a stand on the expulsions issue at the time of Norman's speech, a few days later Oberholser said she said they anticipated no lingering damage in the community from the controversy.

During a 2 p.m. news conference in downtown's Central Park, members of the Chamber dismissed suggestions from Decatur with smirks from the Rainbow/PUSH delegation with a tarnished reputation.

"Some may perceive the expulsion issue as a setback for our community," said Tom Swartz, chairman of the Chamber's board of directors.

"We are confident that the current dispute will be resolved," he said. "We will not divert our efforts or resources to the issue, but that are being achieved in improving the quality of life in Decatur."

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"The community has been very hurt by continually improving the quality of life," he said. "Higher quality education and excellent race relations are essential for the community's future."

Norman said she was hopeful the there is no long-term racial split.

Other leaders acknowledge a divide but are hopeful it can be mended once emotions settle down.

"City Council members [are] Phillips and [the] school board [are] black and the healing process is still bitter. Everybody's charged up right now," Sands said.

With the exception of the perceptions of the controversy evident among the population, the balancing act by school officials is all the more involved.

Arndt and members of the board have withdrawn from the public eye for past two days, hoping to gain a broader view of the events of the past two weeks. Board President Jackie Goetter said the board members will meet in the first of this week to look at its options.

Sands said she is awaiting a response offered by Jackson through the state superintendent of schools.

Drowning in a sea of telephone



MAKING THEIR STAND: Decatur business leaders were on hand Saturday afternoon when the Chamber of Commerce for Decatur and Macon County held a news conference in Central Park. A spokesman for the organization is committed to supporting the Decatur school board in its efforts to make sure all students receive a quality education.

and email, and interview requests this past week, Arndt said he granted only three interviews on Thursday — one to the Herald & Review by cellular phone while he was in St. Louis, one to Education Week magazine and the other to Ted Koppel and "Nightline." That show is expected to air this week.

Ghosts of the past

Arndt said he has learned during his five years on the board that the school board has really never left Decatur; it only lay dormant. He said his first notion of the past problems in Decatur occurred at a town relations forum about a year ago.

"There were persons in that group that I never saw before," he said. "I'm talking about white people — black and white — who brought up things that they experienced 25 or 30 years ago that caused a deep, deep hurt. These

things they remember happened to them when they were in school. Some of the stories were about things that happened to friends of theirs, and they didn't know who to tell."

"When I heard these stories, I knew that the people were speaking from the heart, and I didn't know what to do or say, because we all knew they were true. They were not made up."

Arndt describes Decatur as a microcosm of the country, having become a focal point in a huge social process.

"We're bringing up the bitter, hateful issues of the '60s," he said. "They've never been resolved."

"We are approaching a point of this century. We need to ask ourselves, How do we wish for this century to end, and how do we wish for this century to begin? We can no longer ignore the seriousness of these issues that have cut across every race and every economic class."

## Saturday's developments

■ The Rainbow/PUSH Coalition, led by the Rev. Jesse Jackson, prepared to march again through the streets of Decatur at 2 p.m. today, joined by members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and others. The march begins near the Franklin Street business. The theme is "Save the Dream, and Leave No Child Behind."

■ Decatur City Council member Bert Stockard and his supporters prepared to stage another march today along Eldorado Street. Similar to one she conducted a week ago, the march is to be held here, ready to "settle the violence." Stockard has come out in support of the school board.

■ Members of the American Knights of the Ku Klux Klan announced they will hold a rally at pavilion No. 1 in Nelson Park. Reports coming from the park district officials indicate Klan members will gather at the pavilion between 2 and 4 p.m.

■ At 2 p.m. a press conference in Central Park, the Chamber of Commerce for Decatur and Macon County announced its belief that Decatur will emerge unscathed from the expulsions controversy. Earlier, Jeanelle Norman, president of the Decatur Branch of the NAACP, warned that racism in the city could be further aggravated if the dispute is not resolved soon.

■ Decatur Civic Center officials said activities will continue at the school, even though the civic center and parking lot would be open to patrons only.

## What's next

■ School officials say they will consider some proposals from Rainbow/PUSH and state Board of Education Superintendent Glenn W. McGee next week.



MAKING A POINT: The Rev. James Meeks talks to some of the Decatur expelled students after ceremonies at Operation PUSH headquarters in Chicago on Saturday. Left to right are Shawn Honorable, Gregory Howley, Terrence Jarrett, Roosevelt Fuller, an unidentified person, and Meeks and Errol Bond. Meeks said the Decatur school board acted unlawfully with its zero tolerance policy.

## PUSH: National field director says board acted with 'hostility'

Continued from A1

from other locations, including Detroit, East St. Louis and Cairo, said Meeks, who is national chairman of the Rainbow/PUSH's students' division. In the Decatur school board's defense, he said, "We must lift our children up rather than lock them out of education," Flowers said. As he walked out of the room, he was met by a line of students from the fist of the Decatur students.

Some of those same fist

helped unleash the school board's two-year policy of suspensions and zero tolerance.

On Sept. 17, a fight broke out in the school's football game between Decatur and Eisenhower and MacArthur high schools. The fistfights lasted several minutes and the game was stopped for about 15 minutes. No weapons were used and nobody was seriously injured.

During the first week of October, seven students were expelled for up to two years. The school board left open the option to reinstate the students after one year, but provided they participate in a program that included tutoring and counseling.

After talks with Rain-

bow/PUSH founder Jackson last

week, the school board agreed to reduce the expulsions to one year and allow the students to attend alternative schools.

In his statement, Meeks warned that indifference about the situation is "the worst attitude that we could have." Also he said the majority of the charges that have swirled at first locally, then

globally, in which blacks receive the excessive bruise of school and criminal punishment.

"You must go to tell me that it just happens to be a coincidence that these jails are filled with African-Americans who did not finish high school," he said.

Meeks said persons whose names are not included in the fistfights last year did not graduate from high school, and that "you're on a slippery track from school to jail. Somebody has got to tell them to get out of school to go to jail. Somebody has got to tell them to leave the violence."

Using the Cook County Jail population of 10,000 as an example, he said, "If that kind of reaction there would be if it were composed nearly entirely of another racial group, such as Asian or people of Asian or Asian heritage."

After painting the situation in

decidedly negative terms, Meeks added in a subdued voice,

"We're not trying to be racists, but our kids are in trouble. This is not black or white. This is right or wrong."

Continued from A1

from the school board's perspective, the two-year policy of suspensions and zero tolerance

was not a good idea.

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bow/PUSH founder Jackson last