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Media crush adds to confusion at rally

Tensions flare, but are quickly defused, as Jackson is led away in handcuffs

By KEN DICKSON
Herald Staff Writer

DECATUR — The crowd surged, arms flailed, and bodies pushed and shoved on two different occasions Tuesday as the Rev. Jesse Jackson arrived at Eisenhower High School.

Oddly, it was a sea of media representatives which caused the biggest scenes and nearly knocked over a woman in a wheelchair. Members of the media, including the national television networks, cable news outlets, radio and newspaper people rushed Jackson as he climbed out of his black Lincoln Continental on Tuesday morning and again in the early afternoon in front of Eisenhower High School.

Tuesday morning, Jackson explained his reasons for maintaining his position. He said the expelled students needed another chance and should not be denied an education. He said the school board was wrong in "handing out even-handed judgments and should have dealt with the young men on a case-by-case basis." But then he announced there would be another meeting with school officials. He set another deadline and there was another wall.

Notes and quotes

"The question is, whose cameras hit them? I'm sure the cameras hit them after the press got wild and out of hand."

— The Rev. Jesse Jackson said, laughing, while outside the Macon County Law Enforcement Center after being asked how two Decatur police officers were assaulted.

"That lasted about two hours, but now I'm heading over to Shaw's."

— Jackson said, smiling, after asking if he was on a hunger strike in protest of the expulsion of the students.

"I was asleep. I finally got me some sleep, then the judge said it was a \$10,000 bond, but I didn't have to put a nickel down, but I tried to stay in jail to get me some sleep."

— Jackson said about his plans to remain jailed overnight.

"Don't do anything stupid. Do not antagonize or try to intimidate the police. Respect what they say you should do."

— The Rev. James T. Meeks to a crowd of onlookers outside the Macon County Law Enforcement Center on Tuesday, immediately following Jackson's arrest.

"That was the pastor in me. We're not enemies. We all want the same things. We all want our children to be safe, be educated and to make a decent living."

— Meeks, about giving a tired-looking Jackie Goetter a hug after addressing the school board in closed session.

"It's very difficult. The students might not see them, but they know what's going on and they're curious. It's interrupting teaching and it's interrupting learning."

— Decatur school board President Jackie Goetter on the impact of Rainbow/PUSH events on the learning process.

After more than three hours in the packed school board meeting room at the Keil Building, audience members started posting signs saying "Please send pizza" and "feed us" in front of the public access television camera.

Reporters asked Illinois Gov. George H. Ryan about Jackson's involvement in the ongoing school dispute in Decatur. The questions and comments came Tuesday morning, before Jackson was arrested.

Ryan said he has not taken sides in the debate and won't. He said his involvement was to get the two sides together. He thought the initial compromise offered by the school board was a good one but said Jackson has the right to reject it.

"This was a cause for Jesse Jackson. He's had a lot of cases in his life, and this was just another one," Ryan said.

Before leaving, Jackson told the media and assembled people within earshot that he was not going to force his way onto school property yet. He said if the meeting failed to produce reconciliation and compromise, he would enter school property at "high noon."

After more than two hours behind closed doors in offices at the Millikin Court building in downtown Decatur, Jackson solemnly announced in the first floor lobby that the school district's position had not changed. He spoke in low, even tones, announcing again his frustration that the board would not compromise further.

Jackson then excused himself and announced he was going to the Church of the Living God, P.O. Temple 3 — the site of the two prayer meetings this week and last week — to meet with the expelled students and their families and make final preparations to march onto school property. The noon showdown came a little late, almost 1 p.m. About three dozen police officers formed a line in front of the school, parallel to 18th Street.

Jackson climbed out of his car, repeated his concerns and frustrations, and slowly made his way up the east sidewalk in front of the school.

The media encircled him once again and slowly moved up the sidewalk. After several yards, the mass of people pressed against a woman in a wheelchair, nearly knocking her over.

Alice Troesch, 57, struggled to move out of the way with her 7-month-old great-grandson on her lap.

"No, I wasn't scared," she said. "People watch out for me."

Mark Allen, field director for the national Rainbow/PUSH Coalition office in Chicago, was the one who yelled for the mob to stop and grabbed the handles on the wheelchair and pushed.

Troesch out of the path. A few minutes later, Allen joined Jackson in crossing the police line and was loaded into the van in handcuffs.

The situation nearly boiled over shortly after Jackson's arrest. As police were handcuffing Jackson behind the police line, one Jackson supporter broke through and police wrestled with him for about 20 seconds until he was on the ground.

While no punches were thrown, the brief melee prompted many Jackson supporters to rush forward in what looked like an attempt at engaging officers — who held their ground but were overwhelmingly outnumbered.

A Rainbow/PUSH representative at the front of the crowd frantically pleaded with the crowd.

"Put your hands up and don't resist!" he repeatedly shouted.

Many complied and the situation quickly defused. However, the police line was never effectively restored, with Jackson supporters and media representatives roaming freely around the transport vehicle parked in front of the school.

At that point, Cleo Willis, a minister from St. Louis, lay in front of the transport vehicle. Police arrested him, too.

Several Jackson supporters sat in a circle with their arms locked, but were not arrested.

As police tried to leave the scene with Jackson in the transport vehicle, the situation again got tense.

Many young people, apparently high school age, blocked the driveway so that the transport could not get out.

They chanted, "Let Jesse go," and when instructed to move, they chanted, "Hell no, we won't go."

"Police officers on foot escorted the transport. They pushed the crowd back, allowing the police vehicles to exit and the transport

sped away.

Many of the young people ran for their nearest vehicle. The media rushing for the Macon County Courts Facility, was not far behind.

— High staff writers Ron Ingram, Tom Collins and Brett Wilcoxson contributed to this report.



MASSIVE AUDIENCE: A crowd of several hundred supporters, including a large media contingent, greeted the Rev. Jesse Jackson when he arrived at Eisenhower High School Tuesday afternoon, where Jackson was later arrested.



BECLAM: Members of the Decatur Police Department try to maintain order at Eisenhower High School as police transport the Rev. Jesse Jackson and others who were arrested to the Macon County Law Enforcement Center.



ACROSS THE LINE: 'Save the children,' announced the Rev. Jesse Jackson after he was arrested Tuesday at Eisenhower High School.



CURIOSUS: Students arriving at Eisenhower High School Tuesday morning discovered the Decatur Police transport vehicle sitting in the parking lot on the north side of the school.

High schoolers find it hard to return to business as usual

Students say disturbances and debates make it hard to concentrate on schoolwork.

By BRETT WILCOXSON
Herald Staff Writer

DECATUR — Before school began Tuesday morning, Eisenhower High School Principal Walter Scott said that regardless of what went on outside, inside it would be business as usual.

"We will operate just as we normally operate," he said.

But Eisenhower students say their day was not typical. And students at MacArthur and Stephen Decatur high schools also were affected by the Rev. Jesse Jackson's presence in town, albeit more indirectly.

Christy Marksberry, 17, said it

was a crazy day at Eisenhower. She said her classroom faces the front of the building and she saw Jackson in handcuffs.

"Everybody was talking about Jackson," she said. "About half of them agreed with his stance."

Brian Burns, 16, a junior at Eisenhower, said he saw the 30-or-so police officers who were outside the school in the morning.

"I left school after lunch," he said. "We got off the bus after lunch and there was a huge mob in front of the school."

"I couldn't get back in."

He said he joined the crowd on the front lawn as Jackson was getting arrested.

"It was pretty fun," he said.

Gianina Taylor, a senior, said that all the Eisenhower students were kept in their fifth-hour classes and not allowed to go to sixth

hour so they wouldn't have any students in the hallways while the rally was going on.

Sophomore Tamarious Gray and two friends stood across the street long after the first bell rang. Gray said he was waiting around to see Jackson.

"I'm gonna wait for my guy," he said, explaining that he believes the explanations are racially motivated.

One of his friends pointed out the line of police officers who stood vigil in front of the school.

"Check it out," he said, pointing. "It's a battlefield."

At Stephen Decatur, it was as normal a day as possible under the circumstances, said Matt Turner, a 17-year-old senior, though doors and gates were still locked and much of the conversation among students was about

Jackson and the expelled students.

There were no police cars in plain sight at the school just before dismissal, and the parking lot was almost full, in contrast to recent days.

"I just wish it would end," Turner said. "Both sides have made mistakes."

Concentrating on class work is difficult with all the discussion and debate going on, said senior Jessica Zaitz, 15. She's annoyed that so many people are saying, in effect, "Jesse, go home."

"It's not right," she said.

"Everyone has a right to fight against what's wrong."

But student Melissa Deister, 16, is fed up with the controversy.

"I think it's stupid," she said. "Everyone gets in fights. (Jackson) wouldn't be here helping

them if they were white kids."

The issue has affected the friendship of MacArthur sophomores Jennifer Borders, who is white, and Jasamen Hatcher, who is black.

"This whole thing has turned into more of a racial issue than it has a school issue," Jennifer said Tuesday afternoon. "We try not to talk about it, because we don't want it to come between our friendship. It's really not the ideal subject."

Jasamen, interviewed separately, said "Jen was like my best friend, one of my best friends, and we do not talk about it because there have been so many different opinions. It's dividing us."

— David Burke, Valerie Wells and Ken Dickson contributed to this story.