

A6 CENTRAL ILLINOIS Decatur, Illinois • Wednesday, November 10, 1999

Some question Jackson's role in controversy

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MOUNT ZION — As the controversy over the expelled students continues to divide the people of Decatur, some residents in nearby communities say the issue is cut and dried.

They say that while the fight is not likely to affect their communities, it frustrates them that the Rev. Jesse Jackson, an internationally recognized civil rights leader, is facing off against a school board disciplining its students.

As Jim Mounts and three friends sat talking and sipping coffee at Mount Zion Cafe on Tuesday afternoon, they were reading from the Herald & Review and discussing Jackson's presence.

"I was in a bad mood all day yesterday because of this thing," said Mounts, a 29-year resident of Mount Zion who retired from Caterpillar Inc. "He's not a member of the community and he doesn't belong here."

I would be very grateful if the Decatur community would stand up and support the school board.

Across the table, Charles Cutler questioned Jackson's motive for being in Decatur. He said he believes it is racially motivated.

"If they were white boys that had been expelled, he wouldn't be here," he said.

From his seat next to Mounts, Roger Park said Jackson should not be in Decatur trying to use his political leverage to change a decision made locally.

"The school board made their decision," he said. "That's why they're there."

Despite his reservations, Mounts said he expects Jackson will eventually defeat the school board. "He'll get his way before it's over," he said.

Jackson argues that the punishment handed down by the school board is too harsh and that students should not be expelled, as they can't learn effectively if they're not in school.

As Marry Elliott left the Big Mart on the east side of Decatur, she too said Jackson is making a mistake.

"It's perfectly disgusting," the Lovington resident said. "Jesse Jackson is making a political grandstand over what should be a school board issue."

Elliott added that Jackson has created a racial divide in Decatur that is bound to hurt the community in the long run. She said only one official, Decatur City Councilwoman Betty Stockard, has had the courage to cross that line to stand up for what she believes is right.

After viewing the video of the fight, Stockard reversed her stance and has supported the school board.

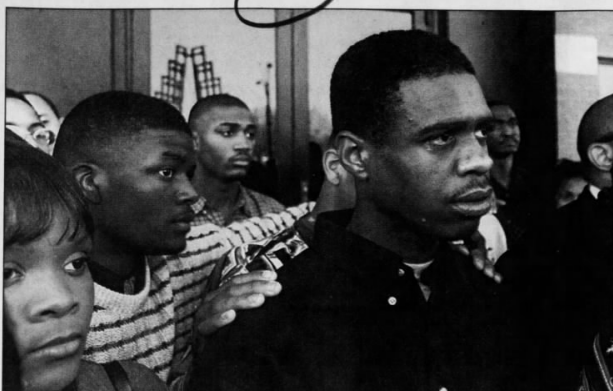
"I'm proud of her for standing up for law and order," Elliott said.

Kristen Walker, 23, said Jackson is doing damage that others will have to deal with in the years to come.

"He's just going to come in here and stir everything up and leave," the Cerro Gordo resident said as she headed into Kmart.

As he moved in front of his Forsyth home, Mike Howies echoed the remarks of others.

"I think the whole thing has gotten blown out of proportion because (Jackson) is here," Howies said. "He's not helping anything."



LEGAL ACTION: Expelled students Shawn Honorable, right, Gregory Howell, center at back, and Courtney Carson stand arm-in-arm to listen to an attorney for the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition describe legal action filed on the students' behalf. The lawsuit said their expulsion was a "gross injustice and has caused irreparable harm."



▲ HUGS, NOT FISTS: The Rev. Jesse Jackson is flanked by the hugging expelled students and other Eisenhower students during a prayer vigil Tuesday evening at The Church of the Living God Temple No. 3.



▲ SIDE BY SIDE: Eisenhower student Elizabeth Buker was at the Rev. Jesse Jackson's side during these cases merited criminal prosecution.



▲ TOGETHER IN FAITH: Pastors supporting the Rev. Jesse Jackson and the expelled students bow their heads in prayer to start the day at an early meeting Tuesday at the Holiday Inn in Decatur.

SPOTLIGHT

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said Julie Moore, president of the Chamber of Commerce for Decatur and Macon County.

"People still remember the problems we had a few years ago when our community was so divided. Now, for some reason, the Rev. Jackson has felt compelled to gain his national headlines and his national prominence in our community, and I don't think that is very fair to us, the people who live here. This is a good community where people work hard to get along, and we don't have many of the problems you see in other communities."

Ken Smithmier, president and chief executive officer of Decatur Memorial Hospital, has worked hard to spearhead economic development in the city and now despairs at what is happening.

"It is very deflating to me. It gives me an ill feeling in the pit of my stomach," he said.

"I have felt that, in the last two or three years, this community has really taken an upswing, and we have many positive things going on. Now I think we have been given a left hook out of nowhere and knocked to the mat in a way I don't think, as a community, we deserve, quite frankly."

Smithmier said his hospital has helped recruit more than 40 new physicians to the Decatur area and "so I am involved in selling Decatur all the time." He said the furor over the expulsions gives him, and the city, one more obstacle when trying to persuade professionals to come to Decatur.

"And Decatur just didn't need any more hurdles placed in front of it," he added.

Smithmier said he received a call Tuesday from a person in Rockford who was considering taking a hard-to-fill technical job at the hospital. "That person said she has seen the news on CNN and decided this was not a place where she would want to come and live," Smithmier said. "So, we see the fallout has started already."

Smithmier said he's worried about how all this will end for the city and fears the level of bitterness and anger, fueled by the national spotlight, has climbed beyond the fates of the students. He's concerned that racism and other issues are being raised and has "trouble seeing any kind of a good outcome for the city of Decatur emerging from all of this."

Smithmier said he supports the school board and rejects claims that it is out to demean any group of students. But he says it's time for the community to cut through the "spin" put on events by others and make up their own minds.

"Everybody in this community needs to see the tape made of that fight," he said, speaking before networks broadcast the tape. "We all need to see what happened, so we can decide for ourselves. We still may not agree with each other, but at least we will know what really happened and can act from a more informed basis."

Decatur Mayor Terry Howley said the media-fueled attention is causing "collateral damage" to the community's image but said not all the energies released have to be destructive. Howley urged the protesters who massed in support of the expelled students to focus on the same energies on helping kids all the time, not just at moments of crisis by TV lights.

"We need to know how these kids (involved in the fight) got to where they didn't care enough about themselves — or didn't have enough adult supervision somewhere along the line — to have done something like this," Howley said.

All of us have to get involved with kids, with the schools, to help all students, whether black, white, brown or yellow. If the community that has rallied around those seven students had shown this level of support and interest in them a year ago, maybe none of this would be happening now."

Jeanne Norman, president of the Decatur branch of the NAACP, said the dispute has set "race relations back five or six years" but she sees Decatur's suffering as perhaps part of a greater good.

"This problem students being expelled from school is happening all over Illinois and other states and needs to be addressed," Norman said. "Now we have someone with the acclaim of the Rev. Jesse Jackson in town to focus national attention on this issue."

Norman said that national spotlight, however, didn't mean the search for local solutions. Citizens can express their views and offer their own solutions.

If we work together to do something positive," Norman said, "then the media and the world will perceive us not only as a place where a silly decision (the two-year expulsions) was made, but a place where that decision caused us to turn around and look at ourselves and our problems and seek solutions."

CHARGES: Complaint calls zero-tolerance unconstitutional

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spirits at Tuesday's rally, vowing to "stay the course" in fighting to have the students reinstated.

Jackson announced at the rally that he was going to meet Tuesday night with Glenn W. McGee, superintendent of the Illinois State Board of Education, to discuss the issue.

A legal defense fund has been established for the students — who will be represented by Decatur attorney Ruth Walker and Lewis Myers Jr. of Chicago — and the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition received pledges of \$15,000 for that fund during the rally Tuesday, Jackson said.

Jackson responded to the expulsions Tuesday by taking the matter to U.S. District Court in Urbana. Six of the seven expelled students and their lawyers say the school's zero-tolerance policy toward violence is unconstitutional. They seek a court order that would force the school board to readmit them.

According to the complaint, the zero-tolerance policy violates the students' Fourteenth Amendment rights to due process of law.

The students also contend that the school board wrongly accused them of "gang-like" activity, doled out punishment disproportionately and failed to provide the students any notice or warning that they could be expelled.

Myers said a hearing before a federal judge must be held no later than Nov. 18.

The case was filed on behalf of students Roosevelt Fuller, 18; Gregory Howell, Terrence Jarrett, Errol Bond and Courtney Carson, all 17, and 16-year-old Shawn Honorable.

"If you think you want a fight," said Myers, rhetorically addressing the school board, "you've got one."

Jeffrey Taylor, attorney for the Decatur school board, said he

had not seen the suit as of Tuesday evening, but welcomed it regardless.

"I think it is better to let the courts decide rather than have him (Jackson) force them through the doors of the school," Taylor said. "Go ahead and let the judge decide if they should be in school."

Tuesday morning, Jackson and about 80 supporters showed up for a second consecutive day at Eisenhower along with the expelled students. As on Monday, Decatur's three public high schools remained closed and Jackson was unable to attempt to get the students back into school. He vowed to continue his daily efforts to have the students reinstated.

Superintendent Kenneth Arndt said he hopes this "community's nightmare will end soon."

"I hope we can get the kids back in school (today), without any confrontation. But, our first responsibility is public safety," Arndt said.

He said the decision about whether or not to have school will be made at 6 a.m. today.

A half-day of school is scheduled for today with no school for Thursday in observance of Veterans Day and Friday because of a planned teachers' institute.

Following his rally at Eisenhower with dozens of reporters from local, area and national media in attendance, Jackson returned to the Church of the Living God, P.O. Box 3, 1702 E. Prairie Ave. It was the staging site for a march last Sunday that saw a group walk to Eisenhower for a rally supporting the expelled teenagers. Decatur police estimated the crowd at 1,200 people, although March

organizers have said it was more. Jackson said he will lead another mass march at 3 p.m. Sunday to one of the Decatur high schools.

There were reports of white supremacist literature having been distributed Tuesday in the area near the Decatur-Macon County Fairground. Matt Hale, leader of The World Church of the Creator, earlier announced plans to distribute the literature and visit Decatur to oppose Jackson's efforts in the city.

Carolyn Wagner, executive director of Decatur Not In Our Town, said Hale would definitely not find a welcome here.

"Decatur Not In Our Town in no way supports or invites Matt Hale to this community," Wagner said. "We don't want his assistance and we don't support his ideas. He's wrong in assuming the school board wants his support."

Jackson appeared surprised when, during a live television interview, he was informed that charges had been filed against some of those involved in the Sept. 17 fight.

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asked. He's wrong in assuming the school board wants his support."

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"This will only make matters worse," Jackson said. "Why wait till 60 days later to make these charges?"

Members of the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition say the charges are unwarranted. They say the charges were filed in response to the organization's refusal to accept a district compromise cutting the students' expulsions from two years to one and providing alternative schooling.

"Why is it after a major march of more than 5,000 people, a negotiations session with the governor and the board of education where we refused to cede to

unreasonable demands on their part, the next day they decide that for the first time in 60 days these cases merited criminal prosecution," Myers said. "What happened here in your town is vicious, it's vindictive and it does not bode well for reconciliation in a community that needs to be healed."

Fichter said he announced last week that action would be taken in the case early this week.

"We followed a normal time line that we use when we have an extensive investigation involved," Fichter said. "This took place at a football game. We are still finding individuals who were witnesses or who were injured. It took time to run down people who didn't have a lot of fear involved. We had to proceed carefully."

Adults charged Tuesday with two counts of felony mob action were Carson, Howell, Fuller and 19-year-old Coryell C. Spates, 19, according to court documents.

Fuller also was charged with one count each of felony aggravated battery and misdemeanor resisting a police officer, according to court documents.

Circuit Judge Jerry L. Patton said the general nature of the charges against the five juveniles was felony mob action. Juvenile petitions are not open to public scrutiny and other information about the individuals involved was not made available.

Mob action is punishable by up to three years in prison, aggravated battery by up to five years in prison and resisting a police officer by up to 360 days in jail and up to a \$1,000 fine, according to state statutes.

During the school board's regularly scheduled meeting on Tuesday, Steven Moore, a junior at MacArthur High School, praised the board for its actions this past week.

Moore said he was at the Sept. 17 game and that Jackson's

account of the fight has been inaccurate. He said he was in a seat about 10 feet away from the fight.

"I saw five to seven teenagers beating on a student so brutally and viciously that I was shocked," he said. "You could hear the fists hit him from the top of the stands."

"I support the expulsions," Fichter said. "Reaction Tuesday to Jackson's continued efforts varied from strong support to strong opposition."

Eisenhower parent Tina Corbin tried in vain Tuesday to get Jackson to stop and listen to her written statement, saying she had sat up Monday evening frustrated and aggravated by the situation with the high schools.

"There are innocent people suffering now," Corbin said. "This is beyond the line."

Another Eisenhower parent, Mark Reynolds, was escorted away by Decatur police officers after making beligerent statements about Jackson prior to Jackson's arrival at a greater good.

"We have a new superintendent of schools, Jesse Jackson," Reynolds proclaimed to anyone who would listen. "I'm fed up with this. My daughter is out of school because of him. I'm here today to find out why they (the expelled students) weren't arrested yesterday when they crossed the street onto school property. I'm here to confront him (Jackson). I'll probably get arrested."

He reiterated his support of the school board during his meeting Tuesday night.

"I want to know why those expelled students didn't get arrested," he said. "The school board said they were going to have the kids arrested if they got on school property. They didn't have. And instead I get arrested."

Staff writers Billy Tyson and Ken Dickson contributed to this story.