

A6 Decatur, Illinois • Friday, December 17, 1999

JACKSON: Men were arrested on preliminary charges of mob action

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delinquency of a minor, all misdeemeanors. Jackson and three supporters were arrested Nov. 16 after crossing a police line at Eisenhower High School to protest the expulsion of six Decatur high school students.

The charges allege Jackson trespassed on Decatur School District property Nov. 7, 8 and 14 and encouraged two expelled students — who are minors — to trespass those same days, according to court documents. The students were barred from school property as part of their expulsions in connection with a Sept. 17 fight at an Eisenhower football game.

Criminal trespass is a Class B crime, punishable by up to six months in jail. Contributing to the delinquency of a minor is a Class A crime, punishable by up to a year in jail. Probation or fines are also possible.

Cleo Willis pleaded innocent to two counts of aggravated battery, and John Cunningham pleaded innocent to a charge of resisting a peace officer. Mark Allen, who also was arrested in November, faces no criminal charges from the incident.

Jackson led a march to Eisenhower Nov. 7, gathered with supporters at the school Nov. 8 and led a larger march to MacArthur High School on Nov. 14.

All four men had been arrested on preliminary charges of felony mob action, but none face that charge now.

Macon County State's Attorney Larry Fichter would not specifically say why mob action charges were not filed.

"There was information filed for the incidents we felt were appropriate pursuant to the investigations," Fichter said.

"Because a decision is made to file an information alleging a particular crime, it doesn't necessarily mean one crime or other crimes didn't take place."

Jackson, meanwhile, said he was somewhat surprised he was charged only with misdeemeanors.

"I never take these charges lightly. They are the price to pay to test our nation's conscience," Jackson said. "Getting arrested is a non-negotiable act of conscience and dignity. If we had not come to Decatur, these seven boys would be on a terminal trail — a death sentence."

The six expelled students — a seventh was allowed to withdraw without being expelled — were enrolled in alternative schools Nov. 18. Jackson said the six are attending classes and making progress.

Later Thursday, during an interview with the Herald & Review, Jackson accused several children of Decatur school board members of harassing another student — an accusation that school officials said was long ago proven untrue.

"We are looking to see if there are board member's children who are harassing other children," Jackson said.

Though he provided scant details, Jackson referred to a specific incident involving three sons of board members who allegedly harassed a female student. The harassment included sending harassing e-mails to the girl, he said.

Jackson said a reporter outside Decatur located the victim's mother and talked to her.

"She does exist, she's not some phantom," he said. "The mother is afraid. She has to live in this town."

Jackson said the mother asked to move the girl from her school, but provided no further elaboration.

Three board members contacted Thursday — Terry Robinson, Phillip Wilhelm and board President Jackie Goetter — said they had no knowledge of any such incident. Superintendent Kenneth Arndt did.

Arndt said he is aware of Jackson's charge and, if he's thinking of the same alleged incident, it was shown to be unfounded nearly two years ago.

"The board, in total, never really knew about this," Arndt

explained. "It was investigated by the administration, like all disciplinary matters."

"So therefore, because it was unfounded and untrue, it never went to the board," Arndt said. "And it was investigated by a variety of persons."

"What's makes this difficult is that we're dealing with rumor and innuendo — just like so many situations in recent months. But just like all other rumors and accusations, they're always investigated."

During the meeting at the church later Thursday morning, the Rev. James Meeks of Chicago said Rainbow/PUSH members will meet at noon Dec. 27 at the Canaan Missionary Baptist Church in Urbana while a federal lawsuit is heard in court. The hearing is over a request for a temporary restraining order overturning the expulsions and allowing the students to go back to their regular high schools.

Jackson also talked directly to the mothers of three expelled students during Thursday's meeting.

"Keep these children in school. Keep them focused," Jackson said. "They cannot let the struggle down. They must accept this challenge."

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