

Inquiry demanded into death of black youth in Mississippi

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The parents of Raynard Johnson, a 17-year-old black high school student who was found hanging from a pecan tree in his front yard on June 16 in rural Kokomo, Mississippi, are urging authorities to reopen the investigation into his death. Over a thousand people demonstrated July 8 in front of the Johnson family home to demand a thorough investigation be carried out into the death.

A local coroner's report ruled the death a suicide, but the parents strongly suspect Raynard was the victim of racist murder. His father found Raynard's body, which had bruises and blood on the arms and hands. The boy and his brother encountered hostility from racists in the town because they were dating white teenage girls. It was reported that a relative of one of the girls was a Marion County sheriff's deputy who was upset that his niece was friendly with a black youth. A group of white supremacists recently held a rally in Kokomo—in rural southern Mississippi not far from the Louisiana border—and sprayed the words “Kill All Niggers” along the bridge.

Raynard Johnson was an honors student at West Marion High School. Many of his neighbors described the teen as happy and expressed doubt that he would take his own life. Just two evenings before Raynard's body was found, his older brother fired a gun into the air near the family's home because he thought someone might have been lurking outside.

Despite the suspicious circumstances, local authorities rapidly ruled the death a suicide. State Medical Examiner Stephen Hayne said the body showed “marks and injuries consistent with suicide, but there was no evidence of injuries from a struggle.” The official autopsy noted an absence of injuries such as broken bones, gunshot wounds or stab wounds, or marks indicating a beating. Marion County Coroner

Norma Williamson cited this evidence as proof of suicide. The coroner also noted that there were no initials, writings or messages left at or near the body from any hate group.

The family has insisted that many details of the tragedy indicate foul play. Even the belt used in the hanging did not belong to Raynard. Frustrated and angered by the response of local authorities to her son's death, and the lack of media coverage, Maria Johnson contacted Rev. Jesse Jackson.

At the July 8 rally Jackson called on Mississippi Governor Ronnie Musgrove and the US Justice Department to launch an investigation into Raynard's death and other mysterious deaths labeled “suicides.” More than 20 reported suicides have taken place in the state's jails during the past decade.

One of the notable participants at Saturday's rally was Mamie Mobley, the mother of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old black boy murdered in 1955 while vacationing in Mississippi for allegedly whistling at a white woman. Now 88 years old, Ms. Mobley traveled to Kokomo to express her solidarity and support for the Johnson family.

Emmett Till's body was found floating in the Tallahatchie River with a 75-pound cotton gin wheel attached to his neck with barbed wire. His corpse was so badly mangled when it was recovered that he could only be identified by a ring he was wearing.

Ms. Mobley refused to let authorities bury the body quickly and decided to have an open casket funeral to allow the world to see what the murderers had done to her only son. The pictures published in *Jet*, a black weekly magazine, stunned the nation and Till's death became one of the catalysts for the civil rights movement that swept across America in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Since that time there has been a considerable change in attitudes toward race in Mississippi, as indicated by the integrated character of the demonstration in Kokomo on July 8 and the growth of interracial dating among teenage youth in areas of the Deep South.

Racist groups, many with connections to the Republican Party, continue to operate in Mississippi. Fueling hate and prejudice are conditions of poverty, growing social inequality and backwardness. Mississippi is one of the poorest states in the country and ranks forty-ninth in the areas of education and health care.



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