

*Learning from Greensboro*

Truth and Reconciliation in the  
United States

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## Chapter 1 *The Truth about Greensboro*

If you had asked the city's main boosters in 1979 to describe Greensboro, North Carolina, they would have painted a picture that was a good deal prettier than the reality. Depending on your life experience, they may have been able to convince you that its levels of peace and prosperity were as high as its tree-canopied neighborhoods and parks were beautiful. That is, until November 3.

Describing Greensboro as a "sleepy little mill town" that evening, national newscaster Walter Cronkite introduced a horrifying story, accompanied by unbelievable video footage that showed it happening: Five members of a crowd gathered to begin an anti-Klan rally organized by the Communist Workers Party (CWP) had been fatally shot by members of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) and the American Nazi party.

Although the taking of hostages in Iran on November 4 quickly pushed the Greensboro story out of the national headlines, the case has, off and on, been the subject of books<sup>1</sup> and articles,<sup>2</sup> nationally aired documentaries,<sup>3</sup> and artistic responses, including a play about the events that premiered in Princeton, New Jersey, in 1996.<sup>4</sup> One might think that telling the truth in a mid-sized U.S. city about a violent episode such as this would be a straightforward process that would take place right away. After all, news cameras record events on the spot as they unfold, journalists report the news, and courts deal with the actors involved through criminal and civil trials.

But when the events in question impugn the good name of a city and its police department, when the story owes much of its provenance to long-standing injustices rooted in race and class differences, digging into the truth of what happened and why is not straightforward at all. Add to that scenario the presence of white supremacist hate groups like the KKK and the Nazi party and radical young leftists committed to ideals of interracial labor organizing with a determinedly militant approach, and the town's perfect cover

The National Advisory Committee benefited from the wisdom of such people as Peter Storey, who was Nelson Mandela's prison chaplain and was on the panel that selected the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and Dr. Vincent Harding, a close associate of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the first director of the King Center in Atlanta. Also on the Committee were Ms. Beni Ivey, executive director of the Atlanta-based Center for Democratic Renewal (formerly the National Anti-Klan Network, founded in 1979), and University of Arkansas law professor Cynthia Nance, who taught and researched in the area of employment law and poverty law.

The LTF included both Claudette Burroughs-White and Ed Whitfield, interviewed at length here, as well as several black elected officials, area academics, activists, clergy, and others. Former Greensboro mayor Carolyn Allen served as co-chair, along with the Reverend Zeb ("Z") Holler, a retired Presbyterian minister who had lived in Greensboro since 1979 and formed part of the BCC leadership. Later, the Reverend Greg Haden, pastor of Greensboro's Genesis Baptist Church, helped lead the Project as a third cochair.

The two bodies crafted three defining documents—the *Declaration*, the *Selection Process*, and the *Mandate* for the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission—and presented their plans to the public.

The Project operated from an administrative base in the BCC. The cochairs, Nelson and Joyce Johnson, other LTF members, and two young staff coordinators, recent college graduates Scott Fryor and Joseph Friterson, Jr., did much of the community outreach work that spread the word about the tragedy and the history-making attempt to transform it.

This work included soliciting nominations of people to serve on the Commission and the arduous task of bringing to the table the seventeen entities organizers hoped would represent all the significant segments of the community on a selection panel that would choose a Commission people could trust. After about six weeks of weekly meetings, that panel whittled sixty-seven nominations down to seven commissioners, whose names were announced at a news conference in May 2004. The next month, more than five hundred people turned out for the Commission's swearing-in ceremony. Once sworn in, the seven commissioners set about creating and then carrying out a program of research and community engagement through which it would spend the next two years "seeking truth and working for reconciliation." Their work involved hiring a small staff, taking statements, holding three public hearings, enlisting the technical assistance of numerous consultants and volunteers, then drafting and redrafting a report that

story emerges: This is about somebody else. Not our city, not our citizens, not anyone of account on our political map of who matters, not about anyone who deserves to be protected or whose rights are important to us.

The vehicle adopted by organizers in 2002 for contesting the community story about what some refer to as the "Greensboro Massacre" was a truth and reconciliation commission (TRC). Consciously modeled on experiences in South Africa and other countries around the world seeking to come to terms with legacies of human rights abuses, this was a bold experiment. Its proponents argued that a U.S. city could learn something from the global South about the value of revealing and acknowledging the truth about political violence. In the process, they hoped that Greensboro could see more clearly the reasons for distrust and division that still haunt it more than a quarter-century later. Perhaps, they thought, this would help the city move from blind denial toward acknowledgment, accountability, and the promise of respect and justice for all sectors of the community.

### The Way Forward

Seeking to "shape the future by facing the past," these survivors and their community supporters initiated what came to be called the Greensboro Truth and Community Reconciliation Project (GTCRP, or the Project). The Project called for creating an independent, democratically selected Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission (GTRC) to conduct an impartial investigation and to tell the community the story it uncovered in all its dimensions and meaning.

The thinking that led to the Project began around the twentieth-anniversary observance as a desire to bring out the truth about the tragedy. Led by the Beloved Community Center (BCC) and the Greensboro Justice Fund (GJF), the group began connecting and consulting with others, including the Andrus Family Fund (AFF). Somewhere along the way (recollections are mixed about who made the suggestion originally), the idea of a truth and reconciliation commission was raised. The AFF called in the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), which had advised similar efforts in international settings. The AFF would become the Project's main funder, and the ICTJ its principal consultant. The organizers from the BCC and GJF soon established a National Advisory Committee and a Local Task Force (LTF), and held several meetings at which the major decisions were made.

painstakingly outlined the context, causes, sequence, and consequences of November 3, along with recommendations for community healing.

On May 25, 2006, the Commission held a ceremony in the chapel at Bennett College for Women to release its final report to the public, placing the violence in the context of a long and complex history of social activism, economic interests, politics, and multilevel government misconduct; dispelling myths; and bringing out previously untold stories in the process.

The *Mandate* of the GTRC directed commissioners to examine the “context, causes, sequence and consequence” of the events of November 3. Commissioners fulfilled the *Mandate* with the completed report they presented to “the residents of Greensboro, the City, the Greensboro Truth and Community Reconciliation Project and other public bodies.” The completed report, a total of 530 pages including its assortment of annexes, reflects the Commission’s assessment of the evidence gathered from three trials, internal records from the Greensboro Police Department (GPD) and federal law enforcement, newspaper and magazine articles, academic literature, and over 150 documented interviews and personal statements given in private and at public hearings.

In addition to the full report, the GTRC also made available a fifty-page executive summary and an even more accessible two-page “general summary.”<sup>5</sup> The full report and the *Executive Summary* start with an introduction explaining the methodology used and noting the limitations that the Commission faced and that make the report’s truth “imperfect.” But the summary notes that the GTRC “looked at a much bigger picture than any court has painted or than any one group of people can tell,” adding that commissioners believe “our efforts have taken us some distance away from the half-truths, misunderstandings, myths and hurtful interpretations that have marked the story until now.”<sup>6</sup>

### The Report’s Truth

Nelson Johnson and other leaders of the Workers Viewpoint Organization (WVO), which became the Communist Workers Party (CWP), had planned a statewide conference on racial, social, and economic justice for November 3, 1979.<sup>7</sup> The event, with leaflets spouting the slogan “Death to the Klan,” was to begin with a rally in a low-income black neighborhood at the Morning-side Homes public housing project, followed by a march to the site of the conference.

The rally, march, and conference were part of a continuum of work that Johnson, fellow Greensboro organizer Sandra Neely Smith, and others had been carrying out for more than a decade to address the numerous inequities that the GTRC confirmed existed in the city. Among the racial inequities the report cited was the fact that Greensboro city council members were elected through an at-large system of voting, which left the black community essentially unrepresented. Significant inequities existed also in wages, education, housing, and health care during the decade leading to 1979. The Greensboro Association of Poor People (GAPP), through which the Greensboro organizers had worked before connecting with people in Durham and moving into the multicultural WVO, often used Black Power rhetoric that was disconcerting to the local power structure.

As part of the planning for November 3, Johnson duly applied to the police department for a parade permit, noting in his application that the parade would begin at Morningside Homes. (Posters contained an alternate gathering place for participants from out of town at the Windsor Community Center, a location more accessible from the interstate highway.<sup>8</sup>) On the morning of the shootings, news reporters gathered at both sites, and camera crews were present at Morningside Homes, where they later captured the killings on tape.

The report found that the absence of the police from the parade starting point was the primary contributor to the loss of life on November 3. The Greensboro Police Department, the majority of commissioners found, had knowledge that the Klansmen and Nazis planned to disrupt the march, that they might be heavily armed when they did so, and that the white supremacists had emerged from a confrontation with the WVO/CWP a few months earlier in the North Carolina town of China Grove with a score to settle. This information came from a police informant within the Klan, Eddie Dawson, who played a leadership role in the Klan-Nazi plans and was given a copy of the WVO/CWP parade permit by the GPD.<sup>9</sup> The Commission found that the Greensboro Police Department’s demonization of Nelson Johnson in 1979 and others in the WVO/CWP resulted in an overestimation of the threat this group posed in relation to the threat posed by the Klansmen and Nazis, which the police had downplayed.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to giving Dawson a copy of the parade permit, police also took the unprecedented step of requiring that Johnson sign an agreement promising that he and other demonstrators would not be armed during the march (something otherwise legal under North Carolina law). This requirement led to much

discussion among the WVO/CWP, with members holding divergent views about whether they should comply. In the end, while Johnson himself was not armed, a few members of the group were, a fact that contributed to city leaders' and the media's portrayal of the event as a "shootout." In its reflection on the role of firearms in this tragedy, the GTRC noted that while guns increase the likelihood of violence, "the idea of armed self-defense is accepted and deeply imbedded in our national identity and tradition, [yet] there is a double standard by which armed black people are seen as an unacceptable threat."<sup>10</sup>

Despite all of its knowledge, the GPD made the deliberate choice to adopt a low-profile plan that would keep officers as many as twenty-four blocks away from the march (with others posted five blocks away) to avoid a clash between marchers and police. Also, police did not warn march organizers of the Klan and Nazis' plans, nor of the fact that they had given a Klansman (the police's own informant) a copy of the parade route and starting point. Minutes before the shooting occurred, two officers in the neighborhood on another call were explicitly called away from the area around the parade starting point. A police intelligence officer followed and photographed the Klan-Nazi caravan as it approached the parade and kept other officers updated. Yet officers did not move in to intervene or visibly accompany the caravan. Key commanders claim they were not monitoring hand radios and so did not stay abreast of the caravan's approach, and all but one of the caravan vehicles were allowed to flee the scene after the shooting.

The Commission found these decisions recklessly endangered the welfare of all involved, including Morningside Homes residents. Nearly all commissioners believed that, "police absence was the result of some intentionality on the part of some officers involved in planning and intelligence-gathering for the march."<sup>11</sup> Also contributing to the tragedy, the report found, was the failure of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF) to share information from informants and other surveillance activities about the white supremacists' plans.<sup>12</sup>

The GTRC report found that, "On the morning of November 3, Klan and Nazi members headed for the parade starting point intending to break the law, carrying an arsenal of weapons and heavy firearms. They planned at the least to assault demonstrators by throwing eggs, and to provoke a violent confrontation. The heaviest burden of responsibility is on Klansmen and Nazis who—after an initial stick fight with demonstrators—returned to their

cars, retrieved weapons and fired at mostly unarmed demonstrators, when the caravan's path of exit was cleared and they could have fled."<sup>13</sup>

In the aftermath of the shootings, the GTRC found that, "City officials endeavored to protect the city's image by attempting to distance Greensboro from the underlying issues that contributed to the event, using tactics including CWP scapegoating. The City's elected officials and managers responded to the tragedy by clamping down on citizen protest in the interest of 'security,' through tactics such as curfews [in the black Morningside Homes neighborhood], National Guard presence, surveillance, and public service announcements discouraging attendance at subsequent protests. The GPD intentionally downplayed its own role in the violence and falsely implying the CWP had deceived police about the likelihood of violence and falsely implying the CWP had deceived police about the parade starting point."<sup>14</sup> Leaders' image-protecting efforts included an intimidating visit by the mayor and other officials to the local television station in an attempt to prevent airing of the footage showing the killings.<sup>15</sup> Even aside from the city leadership's attempt to directly influence media coverage, the inaccurate view most Greensboro residents have long held about these shootings was crystallized for them by the independent work of the daily newspaper, which failed to provide a clear context for the shooting, which the African American *Carolina Peacemaker* did do.<sup>16</sup>

There were two criminal trials, one in state court and one in the federal system for civil rights crimes, in which all-white juries acquitted the defendants, who claimed they fired in self-defense. A third trial came after a number of participants in the march sued in federal court on behalf of those killed or injured, naming scores of defendants from the ranks of city police, local government, and federal agencies, as well as the Klan and Nazi shooters. In that case, the jury returned a verdict against two police officers, four Klansmen, and two Nazis, finding them liable for one wrongful death and awarding damages in the amount of \$351,500 to the widow of Dr. Michael Nathan. Small verdicts were awarded, against the Klan and Nazis only, for two of the several surviving victims. Paul Bernanzohn was one of the two; he was partially paralyzed from a gunshot wound to the head and was awarded \$38,358.55 in compensatory damages, which was never collected. The city of Greensboro paid the \$351,500 on behalf of all defendants in settlement of the case (thereby avoiding appeals from both sides) but has consistently denied any responsibility.<sup>17</sup>

The GTRC's intensive analysis of these three trials led to the following findings, as outlined in the *General Summary*:

...serving liquor to both blacks and whites and had admitted to breaking the legs of a black man who was living with a white woman, in contrast, "the most violent documented acts of the WVO were to engage in target shoot-

ing and karate training."<sup>23</sup> The Commission concluded that one of the major consequences of November 3, 1979, was that "the CWF members themselves, in addition to losing friends, jobs and more, also felt victimized by being denied justice in the court system, being placed under surveillance and being demonized in the mainstream media."<sup>24</sup> Overall, the GTRC found both negative and positive consequences of November 3:

- Beyond the deaths and physical injuries themselves, negative consequences included:
  - Individual psychological trauma, depression, anger and fear;
  - Strained relationships, broken marriages and estranged children;
  - Economic retaliation and social isolation against CWF members and their associates, including loss of jobs and economic hardship, surveillance and a feeling of being under siege;
  - General distrust of police, the justice system, elected officials and the media;
  - Exacerbated race and class tensions;
  - An upsurge in racist violence and hate group activity;
  - Chilled organizing and political activism;
  - Increased distrust of outsiders, denial of responsibility for problems;
  - Tacit approval of violence against political dissenters.
- Positive consequences that emerged included:
- A strengthened resolve for political activism for some;
  - A clearer view for many privileged residents of concerns about the justice system held by many poor and minority residents.
  - A decision on [the] part of some community leaders to drop opposition to the district system for political representation and City Council elections.<sup>25</sup>

### The Commission's Recommendations

The Commission's recommendations—which were grouped into the categories of public acknowledgment; institutional reforms for institutions, including the mainstream media; and citizen engagement and transformation—sought to address harms from November 3 that "extended beyond those who were killed, wounded or psychologically traumatized to include all residents of

- The verdicts in the three trials conflicted with what seems to be a common sense assessment of wrongdoing based on the videotape, resulting in a greater distrust of the justice system.
- A flawed system of jury selection created all-white juries unrepresentative of the community, contributing to the acquittals.
- We disagree with jurors' acceptance that the first two shots fired by the Klan were "calming" shots, and with the juries' assessment that the defendants acted in self-defense.
- The civil trial jury that found Greensboro police and the white supremacist shooters jointly liable for one of the five deaths was a modest dose of justice, but it still left four other deaths unexplained.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the insistence of Greensboro's leaders that November 3 had nothing to do with race—which they claimed was proven by the fact that only one of the five killed, Sandra Neely Smith, was black<sup>19</sup>—the GTRC found that issues of race and class were woven throughout the events. The GTRC also confirmed that serious racial inequities existed in Greensboro. The report quoted labor organizer and folk musician Si Kahn, who said during the GTRC's first public hearing: "Scratch the surface of any issue in the South and you will find race."<sup>20</sup> The report also noted that the idea that the events could have happened in racial reverse—black shooters killing people in a white neighborhood then being acquitted by all-black juries—was absurd.<sup>21</sup>

Although the GAPF was firmly connected to the black community, including the residents of Morningside Homes, the report found that the CWF was not nearly as well connected and that its communist ideology and tactics were not widely embraced. Further, it said, "the WVO/CWF's top-down leadership style was neither empowering nor democratic, and it marginalized the concerns of even its own members. Demonstrators had a responsibility to consult rather than inform Morningside Homes residents about the rally planned there. Many felt angry and traumatized afterward."<sup>22</sup>

The GTRC noted in its report that both the white supremacists, who had forged a "united racist front" of the Klan and Nazis in their efforts to recruit members based on racist, anti-Semitic, and anti-communist sentiment, and the WVO/CWF were guilty of using violent and provocative language during the run up to November 3. It added, however, that such language in flyers and pre-November 3 meetings was constitutionally protected, noting further that the two groups' words should be weighed in conjunction with their actions. Although the Klan and Nazis had criminal convictions for such actions as shooting into a home that reportedly was

Greensboro, which lost ground on human relations progress made after school desegregation.”<sup>26</sup>

• We recommend that the City, the police department and individuals responsible in any way for the tragedy or the harms suffered in the aftermath publicly and privately acknowledge and apologize for their roles, and take specific steps toward reconciliation such as commemorations and community forums. The apologies and self-reflection already offered through this process give us hope that this is possible.

• We recommend that the City and Guilford County confront local disparities by committing to a living wage for all workers, providing anti-racism training, establishing short-term and permanent citizen review committees to ensure police accountability, and creating a community justice center.

• We recommend that the current investigations into alleged GPD corruption be thoroughly and expeditiously completed, that the reports of these investigations be publicly released, and that a town hall meeting be held to solicit citizen questions and feedback. If appropriate, criminal prosecutions or civil action should be pursued to help heal the department’s credibility.

• We encourage all citizens to take an active role in understanding racism, poverty, oppression and privilege around them and the ways in which their own actions play a role in perpetuating disparities.<sup>27</sup>

In the Commission’s full report, these recommendations are detailed more fully over eight pages.<sup>28</sup> Noting that generally, “most of the community has no involvement in righting wrongs,” and that “there is no way to undo the harm caused to individuals and communities on November 3, 1979,”<sup>29</sup> Commissioners recommended that “all grassroots community organizations, religious leaders and, specifically, the Greensboro Truth and Community Reconciliation Project, work collectively with each other and city and county government to advocate for the effective implementation of these recommendations.”<sup>30</sup>

## Chapter 2 *Remembering Victims and Survivors*

For the survivors among the idealistic young activists who were the targets of the November 3 violence, the events brought a rude awakening. Although they were keenly aware of the injustices that plagued the lives of poor people and workers in their central North Carolina communities, they still were naively surprised by the absence of the police at Morningside Homes, particularly because police had usually been visibly present at their prior demonstrations. They expected the police to protect them regardless of the animosity their presence usually generated. That expectation was among many things destroyed that bloody Saturday morning.

Like the GTRC, we find it impossible to adequately convey the picture of all the lives shattered in one way or another on November 3. It was not only about the five people killed, even including their grieving families and friends. The commissioners provided glimpses into the widespread consequences of that day by offering excerpts from statements—from widows, other survivors, children of survivors, religious leaders, former Morningside Homes residents, community activists, journalists, Klansmen, the judge who presided over the trial, former mill workers and shop stewards, academics, the director of the city’s Human Relations Commission (HRC), a city councilwoman, labor organizers, an attorney who represented the Greensboro Housing Authority in 1979, a physician conducting rounds at the hospital that day, and one of the plaintiffs’ attorneys from the civil trial.<sup>1</sup> The enormity of the consequences are conveyed in the brief snippets of these varied stories, and the emotion behind them is palpable, but this chapter of the GTRC’s report can only remind us in the most general way that these were experiences lived in much more detail and over many years, by each individual, in their families and communities.

While we do not pretend to be able to fill that gap here by any means, we do believe that by providing some background about the five who died on