

what had been found. The connection to past mistakes did not escape the attention of columnist Lorraine Ahearn, who commented, "We could keep repeating the mantra: System worked, transparency, total candor. Or we could take a good look in the mirror and follow the truth wherever it may lead."<sup>27</sup> Likewise, the Reverend Greg Headen commented, "This city seems to have a history and pattern of solving problems by demonizing one or two people. The problems go deeper than that."<sup>28</sup> Joyce Johnson commented that, in her view at least, the more recent scandal would not have come to light but for the process already underway to seek the truth about the police role in 1979. To an extent, the parallel revelation of problems in the GPD and the imminent GTRC report impacted each other. On the one hand, the facts that were coming to light about current police scandals made it seem possible that the police could have played a negative role in 1979. In that regard, it burst the bubble of belief in police good faith that many in the community held dear. On the other hand, the GTRC process itself seemed to stimulate at least some people to look past the surface of the press reports about the current scandal and demand more information.

What is perhaps most heartening about the exercise of the GTRC process is the quickness with which young students—none of them even alive in 1979—were able to grasp the connection between that (for them) distant past and their current situation. An extract of the spoken-word piece prepared by University of North Carolina at Greensboro students who studied the report said it all:

... In 1863  
 Good ol' Abe declared to givus us free  
 Which puts the years from now  
 To one hundred and forty-three  
 Since slavery ended, so it's said . . .  
 So why is it that now  
 I can't get ahead?  
 Don't get it twisted  
 It wasn't no moral change of heart  
 This was a time of war  
 And a political decision to mend  
 The schism  
 And to get applause from those abroad  
 The federa-cy  
 Wanted slavery  
 and Reconstruction  
 Still enslaving the

Freedmen wanting  
 To be men  
 Wanting to vote and be treated  
 As equal, then  
 Now  
 We back there again  
 Treated as second class  
 Citizens  
 It's '79 tryna stay alive  
 Wit these wags  
 We sleeping in cages  
 Give me my damn money  
 You see we hungry!  
 LOOK at these racial disparities  
 Education, wages, housing, health care, insanity  
 Twice as many of us living below poverty  
 Why can't we be what we wanna be?  
 When all we want to be is free . . .  
 FRBE to be a young black man  
 who can take a stand  
 without you assuming there's a gun in my hand  
 they tell me speech is free?  
 well not for me  
 my words are interpreted by what you see  
 a criminal  
 a liar  
 a troublemaker  
 a threat  
 and I ain't even said nothing yet  
 but I'm the one you love to hate  
 not an equal citizen but an enemy of the state  
 so I flip a table or throw a chair  
 what I gotta do for you to see me here?  
 anybody the stereotype of anger and rage  
 just to play a part on America's stage  
 where the stories that are told  
 depend on the power you hold  
 But changes gonna come  
 I'll show you I am someone  
 Tired of being overlooked  
 It's time we write our own history book  
 not just about black and white  
 this is a story of civil rights  
 the Truth is we deserve to be heard  
 even if you can't understand a single word<sup>29</sup>

should have some traction in the community. Responses to the survey's questions about justice issues in relation to the November 3 incident revealed fairly extensive community awareness of significant problems with achieving justice, particularly in connection with the events of November 3. While the majority of respondents (58 percent) felt that "the courts in Greensboro generally guarantee everyone a fair trial," a significant number (almost 28 percent) disagreed with that statement. Moreover, while only 17 percent of whites disagreed, 43 percent of African Americans disagreed. Of those who were aware of the events of 1979, only 10 percent thought that "the persons who did the shootings have been punished enough," and almost 60 percent indicated their disagreement with that conclusion. Eighty percent disagreed with the statement that "the shootings were done in self-defense," compared to a mere 5 percent who agreed with that statement. Interestingly, similar numbers prevailed when the survey inquired about whether "the shootings were justified because the persons who did the shooting were provoked," something thought to be a fairly commonly held assumption. Eighty-two percent of respondents who knew about the events of 1979 disagreed (with 33 percent of them strongly disagreeing). A few more people felt the juries reached fair decisions in the criminal trials (about 17 percent), but 50 percent felt that survivors had not "received adequate compensation for their suffering."

It may be late for the legal system to do justice in the case of the 1979 killings but not too late to ensure that the protection of the law is there, equally, for all in the future. That makes the potential reforms significant as a measure of preventive justice that would surely bring some satisfaction to those who suffered because of the events of November 3.

But it is worthwhile to ask another question: Did the truth-seeking process itself represent some measure of justice to those harmed, directly or indirectly, by the events of November 3? For Candy Clapp, just days away from her sixteenth birthday when her world turned upside down that morning in Morningside Homes, a call from the GTRC was the first time—in twenty-six years—that anyone had bothered to ask her about how the event had affected her. For Clapp, the process was perhaps the beginning of a turn toward justice, but getting there would require some acknowledgment by the city of the pain she and others had suffered. Given her experience, her suggestion that a memorial be placed on the spot to commemorate the event was a modest demand. As she recalled in her public-hearing testimony:

According to the Sonis opinion survey in 2004, this recommendation color and poor people."<sup>32</sup>

What happens next is especially important for students, as well, says Burroughs-White: "I think that we really have to find some ways to bring some closure for our students, because they really got into this. I don't want Greensboro just to leave them hanging."

### Reclaiming Justice

One of the Commission's most difficult challenges was addressing what had happened in the lengthy trials about November 3. But it was spared the question that haunts many truth commissions: how to achieve truth but also contribute to accountability through the criminal justice system. As Whitfield wrote:

In the peculiarity of Greensboro, we deliberately chose to forgo additional criminal or civil prosecutions in an effort to open the process. The bulk of the criminal trials of direct perpetrators were over. The shooters had been found innocent in lengthy but ineffective local and federal prosecutions. There had been a precedent-setting civil suit finding the police department and the Klan/Nazi group jointly liable for wrongful death but few people knew about its findings and their implications. Facing a public with little accurate information and widespread confusion about the process, the pledge to avoid seeking any additional prosecutions was useful in getting people to take the process seriously, particularly in the beginning.<sup>30</sup>

The GTRC dug into questions of jury selection, charging decisions, the implications of settlement, and trial outcomes, concluding that "when the justice system fails to find people responsible when wrongs were committed, it sends a damaging signal that some crimes will not be punished, and some people will not be protected by the government. In addition, the majority of us believe that the system is not just randomly imperfect; rather, it tends to be disproportionately imperfect against people of color and poor people."<sup>31</sup>

Having identified issues that would require substantial intervention to effect change, the Commission decided that institutional reform was in order. The commissioners recommended that a restorative justice approach be incorporated into the criminal justice system in the local jurisdiction, through the creation of a community justice center. Although recognizing that this measure might require enabling legislation, the Commission was motivated by "the low levels of trust in the justice system among people of

help bring about, although they were clear they couldn't do it alone. She worried, as did Burroughs-White, that the forward momentum would cease. "I'm worried that the recommendations—some of which are really creative and really useful, are just going to like, fitter away now because nobody is there to push them. I think it would be nice to have some kind of gathering of the groups. . . . It would be nice to generate, what questions worked for your group and how did it go? I think it would keep going more if it had a little bit of support. I'm afraid what's going to happen is that some other incident is going to distract people's attention."

### Change and the Process of Reconciliation on a Local Scale

The South African study of the impact of that country's TRC on the black township of Duduza led researcher Hugo van der Merwe to conclude,

Truth at the community level is unlikely to be effected by attempts to construct a consensus in the short or medium term. The memory of the past is so caught up in the construction of present relationships and positions of power and status that the identification of relevant issues, perspectives and narrative styles would have to be revised constantly to accommodate different parties, contexts and time periods. This is not to argue that the endeavour of engaging with the past is impossible or meaningless. On the contrary, it is deeply meaningful because of its impact on the present and the future of communities. However, it is also an open-ended process. While certain facts can be established beyond any doubt, the relevance of each fact (and each suspicion) will wax and wane as new relationships and social norms are developed. Allowing marginalized voices to participate in such a process is vital in ensuring a more open and honest reflection.<sup>38</sup>

The GTRC's report makes it clear that to the extent that attitudes are at odds around the events of November 3, these are reflections of deeper divisions and convictions about who is served by justice, the police, and city government in general. The GTRC process was successful because it willingly took on and acknowledged those divides. Van der Merwe's remarks about Duduza would probably also apply in Greensboro: It would have been very difficult to start with a consensus about the search for the truth precisely because that consensus can only begin to be built on the basis of the truth revealed by the Commission's work. What might seem to be a circular argument is really about how to find a place to start the work of community healing. The GTRC process assumed that honesty rather than civility should

After the smoke cleared it was a silence. There was a stillness in the air. We knew people were dead. . . . We didn't have a clue what we would see the next day. It was like the children didn't matter to the city of Greensboro. They knew we were there, but they didn't seem to care. Nobody came back from the city to question about what we were feeling, what our feelings were after the killings. Nobody but the church could tell us anything to make it better, and preachers could only tell us to hold on to our faith, God would make it better. God would handle it. The schools didn't do anything to support us. Nobody seemed to care how we were affected. We had to go to school the following Monday. We were expected to function and be focused. And some of us couldn't. There were rumors that the Klan was going to blow up the gas line running through Morningside Homes so we were afraid to sleep at night.

After November third the police treated us like we had committed a crime, like we had killed the Communist Workers on November the third. . . . By the time my birthday came, it was so sad and very quiet. I can't even recall anyone saying happy birthday to me at that time. . . .

Greensboro leaders have never done anything that was necessary to think about justice for those people who were killed and the people that were affected in the community. . . .

Until some justice is done about all this there will always be a dark cloud over Greensboro and every year on my birthday and I remember what happened in my community to those communist workers. I think that there should be a memorial set on that site for them.<sup>33</sup>

For Marty Nathan, "We, the victims, deserve to know the answers to our questions before we can rest."<sup>34</sup> While for Signe Waller, "I would like someone who had a hand in this to say, 'I understand now what we did was wrong. I'm honestly sorry about it.'"<sup>35</sup> When former Nazi and shooter on November 3 Roland Wayne Wood later apologized personally to her and asked her forgiveness, she said, "I was so filled with hope. . . . And at the end . . . I realized that if this man who in 1979 was a thug, a racist, a man filled with hate, that if he can genuinely change then I know that there's hope for this entire world. . . . I know that I've been transformed."<sup>36</sup> Sally Bernanzohn says that just the fact that she can talk about the police role in what happened without immediately being put on the defensive is a huge and satisfying step forward.<sup>37</sup>

Whitfield's initial hesitations about the truth and reconciliation process hinged on the question of justice. He quipped, "It's not like we were about to get state power out of this." But, for him and many others, the process helped point them down a road to justice. Terry Austin and members of one of the "receiver" groups of which she was a part felt strongly that the Commission's recommendation of a justice center, for instance, was one they would like to

be the calling card of a healing effort, and that small steps over a long period would be required to start down a road to reconciliation.

In this it agrees with an international gathering of experts working in one way or another with the issue of reconciliation in postconflict situations, who met in 2004 in Ottawa. This group arrived at what they termed "well-grounded insights" on reconciliation, which included the following: "Reconciliation is most appropriately conceived of not as a goal but as a process. Reconciliation usually involves a long and frequently arduous journey, in which every step is important. . . . No step in the process requires that victims forgive and forget. . . . For reconciliation to be effective, structural injustices present prior to a conflict must be addressed."<sup>39</sup>

The assumption that might be most often challenged in Greensboro is that reconciliation should not impose on victims a requirement to forgive and forget. That kind of demand tends to be a reiteration of the notion that it is the fault of victims that society is broken and places the blame on victims yet again for lack of healing in the community. An interesting blog exchange about the need for an apology from the city illustrates this point:

The fact is that the CWP was a horrible organization that set off the whole thing, the Klan was another horrible organization that took its bait, and Johnson was a part of the whole thing. What is occurring with this civic dialogue is analogous to blaming the fire department after a case of arson burned a building down. The fire department's getting there too late did not cause the building to burn down. The arson did. Had the fire department gotten there quickly, perhaps the damage could have been mitigated, but that does not make the act of arson one bit less serious, or one bit less the most proximate cause.

I am hardly marketing the city's position. It would be foolhardy for the city to accept blame, with any attendant legal implications, under such circumstances.<sup>40</sup>

Among others, this response came within the hour:

[This] analogy would only work under the following conditions:

1. if that arsonist were paid by the fire department and had reported to the department days in advance that he was going to burn down a building,
2. if that building were located in a predominantly black and poor neighborhood,
3. if the fire department had specifically promised to devote resources to keeping the building and its occupants safe and had, as part of that agreement, required that the smoke detectors be removed from the building,
4. if the fire department had followed the arsonist to the building and knew that the arsonist had arson-tools stashed in the trunk,

5. and if the fire department had been absolutely clear about its disdain, or downright hatred, of that building that got burned down.<sup>41</sup>

The GTRC had assigned some blame to the CWP, but it had assigned more to the Klan and Nazis and to the police department. Where does healing start, and is real change at the community level likely after this kind of public accounting? According to the Commission, "Facing the truth about the past is an important first step toward repair."<sup>42</sup> To date, the process pretty much still sits at that point and may for some time.

The city government is far from committing to a formal recognition of the events, and certainly Greensboro is some distance from seeing the GPD and the city "issue public apologies for their failure to protect the public—specifically, the Communist Workers Party demonstrators, Morningstar Homes residents, media representatives, and others present at the shooting site," as the Commission recommended.<sup>43</sup> In fact, at a city council retreat in January 2007, the mayor revealed that after a July 2006 public agreement for him to draft a response to the report from the city council, he had caucused with four of the other white city council members and decided that the issue of the report was not up for further discussion. This frustrated black city councilors Yvonne Johnson and Goldie Wells, who wanted to see the council formally respond to the report.<sup>44</sup> The fact that Johnson was elected mayor in November 2007 might put the *Final Report* back on the city council's agenda. She said in January 2008 that many council members were reading the report and claimed to be open to having the HRC consider recommendations.<sup>45</sup>

Should Nelson Johnson and other demonstrators make a statement of apology to the city council to start things off, as columnist Edward Cone suggested soon after the report came out? At this point, given the public apologies on specific points already advanced by Johnson and, perhaps more important, the initiative by him and others to create the independent process in the first place, such a step seems misplaced. Rather, the community may need to continue engaging in the kind of dialogue and educational work envisioned by the Commission and sit with the truth for a while, perhaps until sufficient change in the composition of the city council and other community dynamics allow for a new point of view on the truth of the Commission. One input into that political decision may eventually come from Sonis's survey, once it is made public, because at least in the very early days of the process 83 percent of respondents who knew about the truth-seeking effort thought the city government should support the GTRC.<sup>46</sup>

The GTRC recognized in recommending that Greensboro's religious leadership "plan and facilitate a healing workshop or retreat for the children of CWP members, shooters and others directly involved in the events of November 3, 1979,"<sup>47</sup> that the hope for personal reconciliation may lie in the younger generations of those affected, a future-oriented task. But it also recognized that while the social inequalities and injustices that lie at the heart of the matter remain unaddressed, change will be superficial rather than of the lasting and meaningful kind. It may be that in working in broad coalitions around the issues highlighted by the GTRC—a living wage, antiracism training, and teaching of the history of November 3—the community will find new possibilities for coming to terms with the truth and forging new relations on that basis. The Project's future-oriented approach, adopted in November 2007, is a step in that direction.

Beyond the question of interpersonal reconciliation (which in some cases may be crucial to community relations), reconciliation as a more general notion of civic trust allows for respectful dialogue across power, race, and economic divides. It is this type of reconciliation that truth commissions most hope to influence. To imagine that reconciliation can occur without acknowledgment of truth and without real change in these relations is to suggest that civility and avoidance can continue to claim priority over a commitment to human dignity and human rights. As Mark Sills put it, "Greensboro has a reputation for civility, but civility based on superficiality is silly. . . . Civility that is based on ignoring past injustices is foolish. Civility that is based on intentional falsehood is ultimately self-destructive."<sup>48</sup>

### *Chapter 18* *Comparing Greensboro*

Why should a city in the United States look to emerging or reforming democracies in other parts of the world to find ways to come to terms with its own troubled history? For some in Greensboro, any comparison of the Klan-Nazi killings in their city with the notorious system of apartheid in South Africa was offensive. So, in their eyes, turning to a truth commission inspired by the South African experience was ill-conceived, out of place, and misleading. A truth commission might be a useful tool for dealing with the chaos of dramatic political change and the formidable challenge of addressing the aftermath of massive human rights abuses, but what objectives would a truth commission serve in the context of a stable democracy like the United States? And there was the nagging question whether the Greensboro TRC was even a truth commission at all.

To some extent, these questions about the GTRC may be secondary to the more important inquiry that sets comparison aside and asks: Could the GTRC process help move the community toward a deeper understanding of past injustice and long-term social change? Could the process itself or its impact deepen democracy in some way? Should the Greensboro experience have a place in the "toolbox" of social justice activists in the United States? But, even as secondary concerns, questions about the use of the truth commission model merit attention because they do express a legitimate skepticism toward the initial idea of the Greensboro process that was sounded both locally and nationally at one time or another.

By virtue of reiteration and a commitment to the idea, the notion that the GTRC was not only a truth commission but also the "first of its kind" in the United States became a fact reported in numerous news reports. A closer look at the process in the light of its claimed heritage and identity reveals a substantial similarity to truth commissions elsewhere; whether this claim is accepted may depend on whether one has an expansive view of the truth