



Published June 22, 2005

Ex-Klansman's conviction welcome news locally
Healing still needed despite the verdict, MSU professor says

By Tricia Bobeda and Matthew Miller
Lansing State Journal

Robert Green is pleased that Edgar Ray Killen has been brought to justice.

He just wishes it hadn't taken 41 years.

"It's justice deferred," said Green, a professor emeritus at Michigan State University who worked closely with Martin Luther King Jr. in the mid-1960s as the national education director of the South Christian Leadership Conference.

"But justice deferred is better than no justice at all."

Killen, a former Ku Klux Klan member, was found guilty of felony manslaughter Tuesday in the 1964 slayings of three civil rights workers in Neshoba County, Mississippi.

Green hopes the verdict will help open a national dialogue on the historical mistreatment of blacks. He thinks the state of Mississippi should formally apologize for its role in that mistreatment.

Green said that healing still is needed.

David Pilgrim agrees. The curator of the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia in Big Rapids called the conviction "a symbolic act."

"I think it's a small victory in terms of redressing the past wrongs," he said. "But there's another part of me that says this country had a long, long tradition of executing blacks and poor whites. Overwhelmingly, those perpetrators weren't brought to justice and won't be brought to justice."

"It's important that we take victories where we get them," he said, "but there's still that incredible, horrible pool of black victims of hate crimes. I'm never going to jump up and go 'woo-hoo,' about something like this."

Others, however, saw the verdict as a more promising sign.

David Hollister, director of the state Department of Labor and Economic Growth, spent the summers of 1966 and 1968 in Mississippi.

The former Lansing mayor was with a group of volunteers from Michigan State University who were conducting educational programs for black high school students.

For him, the jury's decision showed a fundamental change in attitude.

"Mississippi is taking its historical role very seriously," Hollister said, "and letting people know this kind of behavior is not tolerated."

Contact Tricia Bobeda at 377-1213 or tbobeda@lsj.com. Contact Matthew Miller at 377-1046 or mrmiller@lsj.com

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