

July 02, 2010

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Recommended Citation

St. Martin, Greg, "2010-07-02: Justice served in '60s civil rights case" (2010). *News@Northeastern*. Paper 632. <http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d20001875>

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Justice served in '60s civil rights case



Law professor Margaret Burnham (center, right) stands with student Janeen Blake (left) and victims' relatives, Thelma Collins and Thomas Moore. *Courtesy photo.*

July 2, 2010

The efforts of Northeastern University law professor **Margaret Burnham** and her students have led to a landmark settlement in a 46-year-old civil rights murder case involving the Ku Klux Klan in Franklin County, Mississippi.

Burnham directs the School of Law's **Civil Rights and Restorative Justice (CRRJ) Project**, which conducts research and supports policy initiatives on miscarriages of justice in U.S. civil rights cases from the 1950s to the early 1970s. Burnham said the CRRJ Project assists families and communities seeking to reconcile with troubling events of the past, particularly in the

South.

This case revolved around the murder of two African-American teenagers—Charles Eddie Moore and Henry Hezekiah Dee—in May 1964. Moore and Dee were kidnapped while hitchhiking near Meadville, Miss., and brought to Homochitto National Forest, where they were tortured, then tied up and later thrown into the Mississippi River.

One of the victims' brothers, Thomas Moore, was invited to speak about the case at a Northeastern conference in April 2007, after federal investigators reopened it. Moore invited Burnham to attend the criminal trial that summer of a Ku Klux Klansman accused in the case, who was later convicted of kidnapping and conspiracy.

Burnham ultimately represented the victims' families in a civil suit—filed in 2008—against Franklin County, alleging the sheriff's office had had enough knowledge to prevent the murders. Burnham enlisted Northeastern students from the CRRJ to help her delve into the matter. Fifteen students worked on the case over a two-and-a-half year span, holding weekly discussions with Burnham, scouring through police files and interviewing witnesses.

"It was a very challenging case, legally and factually, and the students were dogged in their research and their approach," Burnham said.

The students, she said, were collectively involved in every step of the litigation and overcame the numerous obstacles inherent in pursuing a case more than 40 years old—and after key witnesses had passed away.

Rashida Richardson, a third-year law student who has been with CRRJ for two years, sifted through 1,000 pages of FBI records on the case, and is now writing a detailed case history for the CRRJ website. As an African-American, Richardson said the case resonated with her personally. She has family in the Carolinas, and recalls her father telling stories growing up of the harsh treatment blacks received in the South.

"I just felt like this was a way to get involved to right some of the wrongs, to see how you can use the law to change the horrible history that has existed," she said.

Burnham said the case is the most significant CRRJ has researched since its establishment in 2007, and also is the first successful civil case in the nation brought against public officials for aiding and abetting murders by the Ku Klux Klan. She hopes it will inject a critical element of urgency to the CRRJ's work, given that every case from that era faces a race against time.

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