

Cross Burning Threatens Black Sorority at Georgia Tech 30 Years Ago

By Janine Gomez

Thank God for Smartphones.

As a member of the last batch of Baby Boomers, I admit that I am technologically challenged. I still don't understand why a phone needs to take pictures and videos, and the idea of a Twitter account so people can "follow" you makes absolutely no sense to me! Why would I want to be "followed"? But lately, I have been deeply grateful for phones with built-in cameras and social media. They have been used in courageous ways to uncover scenes of systemic racism that ooze from the fabric of our country like pus. Drunken frat boys and brutal police officers have shown their racist underbellies to the nation in vivid color in recent weeks. And victims of these racist acts have refrained from being silent and shared their pain with the world so swift action can be taken.

I wish Smartphones had been invented when I saw that cross burning in front of our sorority house on the campus of the Georgia Institute of Technology in 1985. The response by school administration then is in stark contrast to the stand taken by the University of Oklahoma after the racist chant by Sigma Alpha Epsilon members was exposed. Justice would have been served, and my sense of safety and trust in humanity would still be intact.

It was an evening in the late fall of 1985. I know because my roommate and I were making extra money taking inventory at Macy's in preparation for the holidays. As she drove down the street towards the Alpha Kappa Alpha house in the center of campus one night after work, we noticed something glowing brightly in front of the house. I remember us leaning into the dashboard, as if somehow the posture would focus our eyes. We pulled up in front of the house to see a 4-foot cross in flames on the front lawn. I don't even remember our conversation after that. My brain couldn't make sense of what my eyes saw, but I do remember, very clearly, what I felt - terror. Sheer terror. Someone wanted us dead.

The image of that burning cross and the fear I felt deep into my bones continue to haunt me to this day. I'm thankful to have an opportunity to share the entire story so I can release my body, mind and soul of this painful memory I have held for 30 years.

We went inside to alert everyone in the house. Our sorority sisters came out, and we stood in front of that blazing cross in silence. Dumbfounded. Someone went back inside to call the Campus Police. We also called our Grad Advisor, Dr. Dorothy Yancy, and I think everyone else we knew. Soon, people began to come to the house. The police came to take a report. Several of our male friends and Dr. Yancy stayed for the rest of the night, sleeping on floors and couches. Here's the strange thing: The media didn't arrive until the next morning. I think about how swiftly the video of the SAE members chanting on that bus was seen by thousands of people. It took time for news of the burning cross to travel off campus.

The terror I felt kept my body rigid, my mind blank. I wanted to call my parents, but it must have been after 1 a.m. by the time I thought about it. My sorors and friends who had stayed the night to protect us were talking about what to do and who might have done this. I said nothing. I just kept wondering how we were going to die and when would the men in white sheets and pointed hats come for us that night. Would they ride in on horses, as I had seen in the movies, or would they drive up in a pickup truck? Did their sons go to Georgia Tech? Would they be the ones to kill us? Dr. Yancy took my roommate and me into our bedroom. She sat on my roommate's bed, and the two of them talked. I remained silent. Dr. Yancy paused and then asked me to come sit with them. When I sat down, she faced me, put her hands on my shoulders, and said directly into my eyes, "Let it go, Gomez." Her words were like a lever that opened the floodgate that was holding back all my emotion. I put my head on her shoulder and sobbed. And sobbed. And sobbed.

Someone hated us, and they left the sign of a burning cross to let us know they were going to do us harm. I believed that. I knew there were racist people on campus - my first roommate in Glenn Dorm moved out two days after I arrived because I was black. The black students on campus socialized together because we knew we weren't wanted at the white frat parties. Those SAE boys sang a song about there never being a nigger in SAE. We already knew that at Georgia Tech; we had no desire to be where we weren't wanted. What I didn't know until that night in 1985 was that we were not only excluded, but hated. But why?

The media frenzy began the next day. The phone of our sorority house began to ring off the hook, reporters calling to get the scoop on the story. The news network trucks and cameras began to arrive later that day. My sorors and I repeated the story over and over. The story made the local news, but nothing went national. One of my sorors and I tried to Google the cross burning recently. There's nothing on the Internet about it. It appears in the world as if the event never happened.

After a couple of days of running into cameras and journalist on my way out the front door of the sorority house, I began to sneak out the back to get to class. Once in class, my mind continued to be flooded with questions that had nothing to do with the lecture for that day. Did the KKK exist on campus? Who would burn a cross on our lawn, and why? Was it someone in my class who did it? Was it him? Or her? Maybe it was a girl? Was it her? Was it that group of students sitting in the first row? Did someone in this class know who did it? It was my senior year, and I really needed to bring up my mediocre grades ASAP. I couldn't focus on anything but finding out who burned that cross. My grades continued to suffer for a while.

“Every 19-year-old male is entitled to five minutes of foolishness...” —Stephen Jones, attorney retained by Sigma Alpha Epsilon

The media stopped calling after a week, but the anger of the black students on campus continued to rise. We gathered in one of the campus auditoriums several times, repeating the story and strategizing about how we would respond. We demanded meetings with the school president, Dr. Joseph Petit (stay tuned for irony), and the Dean of Students. I attended the first few meetings to tell the story, but I don't remember saying much else. The questions that had flooded my brain in my classes continued to swirl in my head and keep me silent.

In the first meeting, Dr. Petit tried to blow off the incident. He said the burning cross was likely a “prank” played by students who meant no harm. The campus police reported no leads on who might have done it, and they weren't really trying to spend time finding out. The sentiment of the white men in that room was very similar to that of Stephen Jones, who was hired to represent the local chapter of SAE at the University of Oklahoma.

Dr. Petit's response struck me. He thought it was a joke? How could a burning cross be funny to anyone? Can't he see the fear on my face? Doesn't he hear how angry we are? I was shocked by his response, and I felt a sense of betrayal. The school wouldn't take the cross burning seriously. The people who did it would never be brought to justice. I took Dr. Petit's response personally, and began to believe he didn't want us on campus either.

The campus police never investigated the incident, but we conducted our own. A girlfriend of a member of one of the white fraternities told us her boyfriend's pledge group set the cross on fire in front of our house.

Those meetings prompted me to focus my energy on graduating from Georgia Tech, and never stepping foot on that campus again. I buckled down and completed the Electrical Engineering

program with an average GPA. I graduated in March 1986. It would be 27 years before I walked on that campus again. And to this day, I can't count one white male as a friend. I don't trust them.

Homecoming 2013 was my first time back on Georgia Tech's campus. It was a surreal experience. Everyone was celebrating Homecoming. I tried, but I couldn't help looking into the faces of the alumni I passed on the streets and wondering if they knew about that burning cross. I had fun reuniting with my friends, but I also continued to have questions about that night in 1985.

The Nu Beta Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha honored Dr. Dorothy Yancy during Homecoming last fall. I had the opportunity to publicly thank her for sitting me down and letting me cry on her shoulder the night of the cross burning. She told me she thought we had forgotten that night. I told her I never forgot. Others in the room came up to me to say they had forgotten about that night - even my former roommate. I told them I never forgot.

One of my dear friends, who was the student representative of the Office of Minority Educational Development at GT at the time, reminded me how that series of meetings with the school's leaders resulted in an office for OMED and more funding, support and recognition for the organization. Dr. Petit died the following year. The next president, Dr. Crecine, did much more to raise the awareness of diversity issues on campus. There is an Institute of Diversity now, and OMED provides a wide range of services to help students of color navigate life on campus.

Life AS (After Smartphones) has made being a racist frat boy more difficult than when I was in college. Look at the outcomes of the Sigma Alpha Epsilon incident at the University of Oklahoma, thanks to Smartphones and social media:

*A young woman records members of Sigma Alpha Epsilon singing a song about niggers never joining SAE. She sends her video to Unheard, a black social justice group on campus. Unheard posts the video on YouTube, and it goes viral. 795,793 people have viewed the video. A slew of other people and organizations have also posted the video, so the actual number of views is in the millions.

*A campus-wide protest ensues. Even the football team joins the protest.

*Less than 24 hours after the video surfaced, the school's president, David Boren, sends a tweet:

“I have been informed of the video, which shows students engaging in a racist chant. We are investigating to determine if the video involved OU students. If OU students are involved, this behavior will not be tolerated and will be addressed very quickly. If the reports are true the chapter will no longer remain on campus. This behavior is reprehensible and contrary to all of our values.”

And another tweet the next day:

"To those who have misused their free speech in such a reprehensible way, I have a message for you. You are disgraceful. You have violated all that we stand for. You should not have the privilege of calling yourself 'Sooners.'"

...”Effective immediately, all ties and affiliations between this University and the local SAE chapter are hereby severed.”

Boren added that the school will become "an example to the entire country of how to deal with this issue. There must be zero tolerance for racism everywhere in our nation."

*President Boren orders the SAE fraternity house be closed. Members in the house are given until the end of the week to move out. The fraternity's Greek letters were removed.

*An investigation conducted by the school resulted in expulsion of the two students seen in the video, Parker Rice and...wait for it...Levi PETIT (is he related to former GT president Dr. Joseph Petit? Oh, the irony!).

*Parker Rice apologizes in a press release. Levi Petit meets with black community leaders in Norman, OK, including the University of Oklahoma Black Student Association president. He makes a public apology that receives media coverage. When asked by reporters if he knew the meaning of the words, Pettit said, "I knew they were wrong, but I didn't know how or why they were wrong. **I never thought of myself as a racist. I never considered the possibility**".

I highlighted the last sentence of Levi Petit's statement because it is this sentiment that begins the work of dismantling racism. Smartphones and social media have brought to light what white people have excused as pranks and harmless shenanigans, and what police officers have viewed as necessary actions of self-defense. Victims of blatant racism and physical harm now have technology to give the world a glimpse into their pain, and they can use technology as a tool to take a stand and provoke action. Levi Petit was made to see he is racist through a video of

himself caught in the act and the public outrage gave him direct feedback to change his ways (if he really wants to change). Technology has acted as both a window and a mirror to raise our awareness that we are not in a “post-racist” society, and to bring us together globally to do something about it.

I carried the events of 1985 and that fear and distrust in my spirit for 30 years. Being a victim of racism and hatred is painful, no matter how blatant or violent. It cuts into one's being and changes him/her forever. I just wish we had had Smartphones back in 1985. I'm so thankful for the brave use of them today.

Posted at Teaching for Change, <http://civilrightsteaching.org/resource/cross-burning-at-georgia-tech/>

© Janine Gomez, April, 2015