Telling the truth about racism

The story of James Thompson and David Simpson is one of many that cry out for an acknowledgment of wrongs done.

by Peter W. Marty in the May 22, 2019 issue

James Thompson and David Simpson with Kelly Alexander of the NAACP. Wadesboro, North Carolina, January 1959.

It all began with a childhood dare. The end result was shattered lives.

In October 1958, two African American boys in Monroe, North Carolina—James Thompson, age nine, and David Simpson, seven—were playing with friends in the white neighborhood where James's mother was a domestic housekeeper.

Decades later, in a StoryCorps interview that aired on NPR, Thompson described the moment: "One of the little kids suggested that one of the little white girls give us a kiss on the jaw. The little girl gave me a peck on the cheek, and then she kissed David on the cheek. So, we didn't think nothing of it. We were just little kids."

When the eight-year-old girl told her mother of the kiss, the mother called police and accused the boys of raping her daughter. Police arrested Thompson and Simpson on molestation charges and took them to a basement jail cell where the boys were handcuffed and beaten repeatedly.

“We thought they was gonna kill us,” remembers Thompson. The Ku Klux Klan burned crosses in the yards of the boys’ homes. Shotgun-toting neighbors fired on their houses. James’s and David’s mothers were fired from their jobs. Six days elapsed before the boys’ parents were allowed access to them. Juvenile judge Hampton Price declared the boys guilty, sentencing them to juvenile detention until age 21. “Since they just stood silent and didn’t say nothin’,” reasoned Price, “I knew that was a confession of guilt.”

National outrage emerged over what became known as “The Kissing Case.” Protesters in European cities blasted the failure of justice. After three months of detention, the boys were released without explanation. Thompson’s sister, Brenda Lee Graham, remembers that when James returned home, “it was like seeing somebody different that you didn’t even know. He never talked about what he went through there. But ever since then, his mind just hasn’t been the same.” Thompson spent years of his adult life in and out of prison for robbery.

As Thompson said on StoryCorps in 2011: “I always sit around and I wonder, if this hadn’t happened to me, you know, what could I have turned out to be? Could I have been a doctor? Could I have went off to some college, or some great school? It just destroyed our life.”

The editorial in this issue (“The point of talking about reparations is to reckon with generations of racial injustice”) makes the case for the United States having a serious conversation about reparations for slavery. While huge logistical, process, and fairness questions would inevitably dog policy debates, conversation about the subject would be valuable to national truth telling. Legalized discrimination in employment, housing, education, and health for generations of black Americans is the byproduct of centuries of enslaving their ancestors. The massive racial wealth gap in America is such that the median white family’s net worth—$171,000—is ten times that of the median black family’s net worth (Federal Reserve Board of Governors, 2016).

Although discussions of reparations generally focus on monetary compensation, a more fruitful opening to conversation might begin with acknowledging specific wrongs that yearn for reconciliation. The families of James Thompson and David Simpson, for example, never received an apology from authorities. “I still feel the hurt and the pain from [the whole ordeal],” says Thompson. “Nobody never said, ‘Hey, look, I’m sorry what happened to y’all. It was wrong.’” Yes, it was—and still is—all wrong.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Done and left undone.”