

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF COLORED PEOPLE
MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND BRANCH
BOX 2165
ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND 20852

March 1, 1993

William S. Sessions, Director
Federal Bureau of Investigation
JEH Building
10th and Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20535

Dear Mr. Sessions:

The Montgomery County Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People has authorized me to write this letter to you. Our concern is the hanging death of a nineteen-year-old African American male and its investigation by our County Police.

The police neglected to preserve, failed to look for and destroyed evidence. They broke state laws, refused to follow standard police investigative procedures and acted in a hostile fashion when presented with reasonable requests for information.

- Keith Warren's body was found hanging July 31, 1986 in a wooded area in upper Montgomery County.
- The police failed to rope off or secure the scene when they arrived. Witnesses milled about the hanging scene.
- The police told the coroner to declare this a suicide. The coroner never saw the body and did as the police asked.
- The police declared that this was a suicide before interviewing witnesses. For example, the suicide was declared before the police asked the young man's mother whether he had a reason to kill himself. (She said that he had been hospitalized a short while about a year before for depression when she and her husband had separated.)

- The body was hanging in a fashion to suggest that it had been hoisted on a rope which hung over a limb.
- There was nothing at the scene for the young man to have "jumped off" of to kill himself.
- There was no autopsy; this violated state law.
- No toxicological examinations or other studies were performed on the body.
- The body was taken to the Collins Funeral Home without the young man's parents' consent. The family said that they wanted to see the body before it was embalmed, but were not allowed to do so.
- The police took photographs of the body at the scene. It showed one set of clothes on the body, but the parents received another set of clothes. Possible physical evidence was, hence, lost.
- The tree from which the body was found hanging was cut down by the police and preserved as "evidence". No fiber analysis was done on the branch to see if the rope was hoisted or the body dropped from the tree.
- The tree was subsequently destroyed by the police.
- The police interviewed only three witnesses about the event.
- One of the three witnesses interviewed by the police died in what has been called a bicycle accident; they say he fell off of his bicycle at 5:00 AM and hit his head and died.
- Another of the three witnesses will not talk about the event; apparently he was shown pictures of the body and was told that the same thing would happen to him.
- The official police photographs were left on the family's doorstep on their son's birthday.

- A volunteer private investigator interviewed more than thirty witnesses. These witnesses said that the young man was not depressed, was not talking about killing himself or was otherwise self-destructive; he was not involved with drugs and has no record.
- Retired police officers believe that this was a hanging rather than a suicide.
- A pathologist wrote a report saying that this was a hanging rather than a suicide.

The Montgomery County Police have been presented with this evidence. They refuse to consider reopening the case. They have treated the family with disrespect.

We are advised that the destruction and failure to preserve evidence means that there will probably never be a successful prosecution of anyone for the hanging. We believe that ample evidence exists, however, that places the Montgomery County Police Department's conduct in real question.

Reasonable people can argue either that the police were cavalier about what they chose to view as a suicide of a young African American male or that there was an intentional, systematic destruction of evidence and failure to obtain and preserve evidence.

Sincerely,

W. Gregory Wims
President

WGW/lm
Enclosures

cc: Stuart M. Gerson, Acting Attorney General
President Bill Clinton