

H A R L A N R I C H A R D S

JUST MERCY By Bryan Stevenson

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A few years ago I wrote a blog about how it only takes one person to start a movement or to make a positive difference in the world. Most people sit back and say "What could I possibly do? I'm only one person."

Bryan Stevenson knew he didn't have enough help or enough resources to take on the task he chose for himself but he went ahead anyway and did the best he could. Bryan obtained his law degree from Harvard and moved to Montgomery, Alabama where he founded the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI). His purpose was to provide legal representation to those on death row in Alabama, many of whom did not get fair trials and were not guilty of the crime for which they were convicted.

He highlights the case of Walter McMillian in great detail - a man who was knowingly and intentionally framed for a murder in the 1980s he couldn't possibly have committed. Ironically, he was convicted in the county where Harper Lee grew up and which was the setting for her classic book, "To Kill a Mockingbird." The reason Mr. McMillian was chosen to be framed was that he was having an extramarital affair with a white woman (he was African-American).

It took Bryan 6 years to free Mr. McMillian and all during that time he was steadily building up EJI and marshalling resources to fight the injustices all around him. As more people teamed up with EJI, Bryan was able to do more for more people. He saved many innocent people from being put to death. He was also responsible for virtually every recent U.S. Supreme Court decision which saved minors from death sentences and life without parole (lwop) sentences. He didn't win all of his challenges but he brought the issues to light and forced judges and the public to acknowledge them.

One thing that touched me deeply was how he had obtained the release of 2 men who had been sent to prison as minors in the 1960s to served lwop sentences. Joshua Carter was 16 when he was convicted of rape and given lwop. He was released after almost 50 years in prison. Robert Casten received lwop in the 1960s and was also released after almost 50 years. These men would have died in prison had it not been for Bryan.

One man saw a need and addressed it. He helped thousands of people and created an organization whose impact will be felt for decades to come. The title to his book, "Just Mercy," says it all. We need to temper justice with mercy and seek to heal the damage crime has done rather than thirst for vengeance.