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Reliving a nightmare

Betty Jean Owens had the courage to testify 52 years ago

By Gerald Ensley
DEMOCRAT SENIOR WRITER

Betty Jean Owens has never really gotten over her brutal rape — even though it was 52 years ago.

She still worries about repercussions from the four men who raped her. She still feels embarrassed to have been victimized. She never told her five grown children about the incident until a few years ago.

But she has never regretted testifying against the men and sending them to prison.

"It was never an option not to testify," said Owens, now 71.

"It was my turn to speak up, and if I didn't, what would have happened?"

Owens was the victim of one of the most infamous events in Tallahassee history: In May 1959, Owens, a student at Florida A&M, was raped by four white Tallahassee men — who were then

convicted by an all-white jury and sentenced to life in prison.

It was only the third time in Florida history, and one of the few times in U.S. history, that white men were convicted of sexually assaulting a black woman — despite a long history of white men forcing themselves sexually on black women.

The case drew international attention as reporters from all over the world converged on Tallahassee. Stories appeared in the *New York Times*, *London Express*, *Time* magazine and on national television. A young Alabama minister who was becoming famous for his civil rights activism, Martin Luther King Jr., visited Tallahassee.

The case proved a watershed: Over the next few months, white men were convicted and sent to prison for sexually assaulting black women in Alabama, North Carolina and South Carolina.

And over the next few years, the U.S. civil rights movement gained strength. Lunch counter sit-ins



Then-19-year-old Joe Cooke Jr., on his first solo patrol as a Leon County Sheriff's Deputy, was alerted to the rape of a Florida A&M University student in the early morning hours of May 3, 1959. After a high-speed chase, four assailants were arrested.
GREY VILLET/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images

began in 1960. James Meredith enrolled at the University of Mississippi in 1962. The U.S. Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. King led his famous Selma to Montgomery marches in 1965. School desegregation began in earnest.

So much of what followed in the civil rights movement, said author Danielle McGuire, is a tribute to Owens and other black women like her who were sexually victimized by white men yet spoke out and helped end a centuries-long form of oppression.

McGuire is the author of "At The Dark End of the Street. Black Women, Rape and Resistance — A New History of the Civil Rights Movement

See OWENS, PAGE 4 / NEWS



Online

Visit Tallahassee.com to watch a video of Senior Writer Gerald Ensley explaining how he approached this story and why it's important to revisit the case 52 years later. E-edition users, click on this link to view Ensley's video about the Owens story: <http://www.tallahassee.com/1959rape>

Inside

Though three of the four men returned to prison, only one of Owens' rapists remains behind bars.



STEVEN CANNON/Special to the Democrat
National Public Radio host Ira Glass performs at Ruby Diamond Concert Hall as part of Seven Days of Opening Nights on Saturday.

NPR host speaks; movie fans see sneak peek

By Paul deRevere
and Mark Hinson
DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITERS

A large and noticeably younger crowd of National Public Radio listeners filed into Ruby Diamond Concert Hall on Saturday night to see "This American Life" host and co-creator Ira Glass talk about storytelling, how he and his producers make the show and to spin a couple of yarns.

But first the lights had

Online
TALLAHASSEE.COM

See a photo gallery of Ira Glass' Seven Days of Opening Nights presentation.

INSIDE

Matinee Saturday shows off arts, more. Page 1, Local & Capital

to come up.

"I wanted to do the whole

show with the lights down," Glass said, to laughter. "To simulate radio."

Glass brought the lights up and showcased some of the most topical moments from "This American Life" for the setting, including a segment from the 2009 episode "If I Party School," where Glass visited State College, Pa., which — like Tallahassee — lives and dies by college football, and spotted various co-ed hijinx including vandalizing stop

signs and urinating on private property.

"Is that what it's like here?" Glass joked.

Before the event, Glass greeted and took pictures with a long line of fans and public-radio contributors at a fundraiser for WFSU-FM, the local public-radio station, at the nearby Beth Moore Lounge in the Longmire Arts and Sciences Building.

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After a job loss, concentrate on money basics

By Dave Hodges
DEMOCRAT BUSINESS EDITOR

Individuals who lose their jobs and must take up the search for employment find they have an additional complication — figuring out how to stretch income dollars during what can be a long period out of work.

Craig Garrett of Crawfordville says he's fortunate to have had some savings to fall back on during the nine months he has been without employment. He's also reduced personal expenses

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Optimism keeps Craig Garrett going in search for work. Page 12 / News
Health care industry helping to cure job ills. Page 13 / News
Employment classifieds inside. Page 14 / News

wherever possible, and family members and friends have helped him out as well.

"Literally, you cope and you learn to live day by day," said Garrett, who diligently follows a job search routine, hopeful that it will produce results.

Heidi Copeland, a former home-economics teacher and now a

family and consumer-science agent with the Leon County Cooperative Extension Service, says basic money-

See DOLLARS, PAGE 13 / NEWS

Online
TALLAHASSEE.COM

Read more tips on managing your income between jobs.



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Three of four rapists would return to prison

By Gerald Enslay
DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITER

The four white men convicted of raping black Florida A&M student Betty Jean Owens in 1959 were sentenced to life in prison.

But all four were paroled within eight years.

Three would return to prison on other charges, though only one remains in prison today.

"(Fear of reprisal) is always there because they're not in prison," Owens said in a recent interview. "(The legal system) didn't do what they said."

The youngest of the four assailants, Ollie Stoutamire, 16, was paroled in 1965. He now lives in nearby Grand Ridge and state records indicate no further brushes with the law.

Patrick Scarborough, 20, was paroled in 1966, then bounced in and out of jail until 1993, when he was convicted of attempted murder. Sentenced to life in prison, he is incarcerated in Miami.

Ted Collingsworth, the oldest (23) and only married assailant, was paroled in 1967, then went back to prison in 1975 on a parole violation. Paroled in 1976, state officials have no information on his current location or whether he is still alive.

David Beagles, 18, was paroled in 1965 — but would return to prison.

In 1969, Beagles was arrested for the murder of another young black woman — coincidentally, apparently, with a similar name: Betty Jean Houston. That woman was

choked, beaten, shot twice in the head with a .25-caliber pistol and buried in a shallow grave near the intersection of Springhill Road and Capital Circle.

Beagles' red Mustang was found abandoned at the scene and the victim's fingerprints were inside. Testimony at the trial confirmed Beagles' wife owned a .25-caliber pistol, though it was never found.

Ollie Stoutamire testified Beagles had boasted to him in jail he planned to kill a black woman as revenge for his 1959 conviction.

An all-white jury convicted Beagles of first-degree murder. He was sentenced to life in prison again.

But five years later, in

1974, an appeals court ordered a new trial, saying jurors in the murder trial should not have been shown 81 photos from the grisly crime scene.

At the second trial, a witness testified he saw a blue car and a man other than Beagles at Springhill and Capital Circle at the time of the murder.

Beagles also took the stand and repeated his claim from 1969 that he had hit Houston with his car at the intersection and when he stopped to investigate, she jumped in his car. When he heard the sirens of police — alerted by a passing motorist who had seen a battered woman trying to flag down cars at the intersection — Beagles said he took off running on foot because he was on parole.

He ran to the nearby home of George Stoutamire — Ollie's father — and persuaded him to give Beagles a ride to Marianna.

"I thought I was leaving a hit and run accident (not a murder)," Beagles said at the trial.

This time, an all-white jury found him not guilty.

"My wife, who attended all my trials, said it was the best final argument she ever heard me make," said Tony Guarriso, the prosecuting attorney. "Then after he was acquitted, I heard some rumblings that one of the jurors thought (Beagles) had already spent enough time in prison."

Yet Beagles wasn't freed immediately. Because he had fled to Marianna,

Beagles' parole for the 1959 rape was revoked for leaving Leon County. Beagles spent another 16 years in state prison before he was paroled in 1990. He now lives in Dadeville, Ala.

Beagles and Stoutamire had low enforcement connections. George Stoutamire, Ollie's father, was the first cousin of Frank Stoutamire, a longtime Leon County sheriff (1923-1953), who was Tallahassee police chief (1953-1968) at the time of the rape.

Beagles' brother, Earl Beagles, was a TPD sergeant and head of the vice squad. He was dismissed from TPD in 1980 after pleading no contest to charges he had sex with two women he arrested for prostitution.

OWENS

From Page 1 / NEWS

from Rosa Parks To the Rise of Black Power."

Published in September, the book grew out of the master's thesis McGuire wrote on the Owens case in 1999 at the University of Wisconsin (and included several research trips to Tallahassee). In 2004, she published the essay in the *Journal of American History*. And in 2007, after researching many other cases like Owens', she wrote a Ph.D. dissertation at Rutgers, which became her book.

She calls Owens "a hero."

Ground-breaking case

"I think (Owens') case is ground-breaking and crucial in understanding the civil rights movement," said McGuire, a history professor at Wayne State University in Detroit. "It broke the institutional silence against such crimes and made the whole world pay attention."

And it broke one of the pillars of white supremacy, which was sexual violence against black women. Once white men began to get real sentences for that crime, the practice began to wane.

Most of the principals in the Owens case, such as white prosecutor William Hopkins and white judge May Walker, both of whom endured criticism from local residents, have died. But Betty Jean Owens and her four attackers (see accompanying story) are still alive.

Married for 49 years and the mother of a daughter and four sons, Owens has not spoken publicly about the rape since 1959 when she gave interviews to several black national newspapers. But she spoke on the telephone with the *Tallahassee Democrat*, with the stipulation the newspaper not identify her married name or where she lives.

Though she was aware of McGuire's essay — and recently received a copy of the book and a note from McGuire — she said she never thought of her case in a historical context.

"I was just thankful to be alive," she said. "It was an embarrassment to me. I never thought it was my fault. But you do wonder why it happened. I wasn't bothering anybody."

Left behind

On May 2, 1959, Owens, a 19-year-old Tallahassee native, was a freshman at FAMU. After attending the annual Green and Orange Ball, she and a girlfriend and their dates drove over to nearby Gauthier Park to relax. It was 1 a.m., and the students had been there about 15 minutes, when four young white men drove up in a car.

The four men were Ted Collingsworth, 24, a telephone lineman; Patrick Scarborough, 20, an Air Force airman; David Beagles, 18, a senior at Leon High; and Ollie Stoutamire, 16, a pipeline worker. Reportedly,



From left to right, David Beagles, Ollie Stoutamire, Ted Collingsworth and Patrick Scarborough were convicted of raping FAMU student Betty Jean Owens in 1959.

they had spent the night drinking.

The four would later claim they were searching for black youths who had thrown stones at Collingsworth's home off Lake Bradford Road. Yet a friend of Beagles would testify at their trial they told him earlier in the evening they planned to "go out and get a (N-word) girl."

Scarborough stuck a shotgun through the driver's window and ordered the four students, dressed in tuxedos and formal gowns, to get out of their car. Collingsworth forced the two men to kneel and held them at gunpoint; Beagles held a knife to the two women.

They told the two men to get in the car and leave. As they left, one woman took off running. Owens was left with the four men.

Beagles held the knife to her throat and said, "We'll let you go if you do what we want." They forced her into their car and drove a few miles away to a wooded area off Orange Avenue, likely near today's Innovation Park.

There, the men forced her to remove her clothes and lie on the ground — where they raped her seven times. All but Collingsworth raped her twice each.

After Owens was taken away, the two young black men circled back, found the other woman, and the three of them drove until they were able to flag down the car of a Leon County deputy sheriff. The deputy happened to be a white, Florida State University student named Joe Cooke Jr., who was interning in the sheriff's office and riding a beat by himself for the first time.

To the surprise of the students, Cooke immediately agreed to go look-

ing for the four assailants and alerted his supervisor. Other sheriff's deputies, the Tallahassee police and the Florida Highway Patrol joined the search.

Signed confessions

With the two male students in Cooke's car, the men's blue Chevrolet was spotted about 4 a.m. When Cooke turned on his flashers, the car took off. Cooke chased the men at speeds up to 90 mph before they finally pulled over at a gas station on Railroad Avenue, near Gaines Street. Cooke held the four men at gunpoint until other law-enforcement officers arrived and arrested the men. Owens was found on the floor of the back seat of the car, her eyes blindfolded with a diaper. She collapsed when she was helped from the car and was taken to the hospital.

At the Leon County Jail, all four men signed confessions admitting to kidnapping and having sexual relations with Owens. But they laughed and joked and did not seem to take their arrests seriously. The incident and arrests were front page news in the next morning's *Tallahassee Democrat*. Florida A&M students, who had been active in the 1956 Tallahassee bus boycott, swung into angry action.

A demonstration was held on campus the Sunday morning and 1,500 students filled Lee Hall for a convocation. By Monday morning, they were holding vigils on the campus plaza.

FAMU student Patricia Stephens Due, who would later become a local activist, said FAMU women students felt helpless and unsafe and told McGuire in 1999, "It was like all of

us had been raped."

'I was afraid they would kill me'

The four men's trial began June 11, 1959. Three had court-appointed attorneys; the wife of Collingsworth, the only married defendant, hired an attorney. All four pleaded not guilty. Because rape was then a capital offense in Florida, all men faced the possibility of death in the electric chair if convicted.

Their attorneys would avow repeatedly the men believed Owens had consented to sex — even though they had kidnapped her at gun- and knife-point.

Owens took the stand and described the attack in detail. She told how she begged them to let her go but that "I never had a chance to get away."

"I was so scared, but there was nothing I could do with four men, a knife and a gun," she said. "I couldn't do anything but what they said."

To Hopkins' direct question: "Did you consent?" to the sex, Owens was firm: "No sir, I didn't."

The four defense attorneys questioned Owens for an hour. They asked her if she was a virgin, trying to prove she was promiscuous. They tried to prove she consented to the sex because she never struggled or tried to get away. When one attorney angrily asked why she didn't call out for help, Owens said: "Because I was afraid they would kill me."

The defense attorneys argued that if she were actually raped, she would have sustained severe injuries. Two doctors, one white, one black, who examined her the night of the rape testified she was "hysterical, crying and jerking all over the place," when they examined her and that she "definitely had sexual relations."

Owens testified she was unable to use one leg and one arm for several days in the hospital and she was accompanied to the grand jury hearing after the attack by a nurse.

When their attempts to discredit Owens failed, the

defense attorneys tried to exonerate their clients by pointing out their ignorance and troubled family backgrounds.

Scarborough's mother was murdered when he was 7 and his father committed suicide the same year. Stoutamire, whose mother died in his childhood, was labeled a "follower" with an IQ of 85 who had "evident mental incapacity and is incapable of serious thought."

Collingsworth, who had an IQ of 60 and was illiterate, was reportedly uncontrollable when he drank and had a history of beating his wife.

In closing arguments, one of the defense attorneys called the crime "insignificant" and said of his client "his motives, intentions and designs that night were wholesome, innocent and decent."

Another defense attorney reportedly shouted in his summation: "Are you going to believe this (N-word) wench over these four boys?"

The 12-man, all-white jury took three hours to return a verdict of guilty for all four men — but with a "recommendation of mercy." Because of that recommendation, the men were spared the electric chair and sentenced to life in prison.

Many Tallahassee black residents were upset by the sentence. At the time, four black men were on Death Row for raping white women while no white man in Florida had ever been sentenced to death for raping a black woman. But Tallahassee civil rights leader Rev. C.K. Steele called the verdict progress and reminded fellow blacks the four white men "wouldn't have even been arrested 20 years ago."

Many in the white community were upset by the conviction. One woman wrote Judge Walker, saying, "Negro women like to be raped by white men" and "something like this will help the Supreme Court force this low-bred race ahead and (force white children) to associate with the little apes, grow up and marry them."

Sharing her story

Owens was impregnated during the rape. Because abortions were illegal in Florida, prosecutor Hopkins made arrangements for Owens to have an abortion in New York.

When she returned home, she tried to return to life as a student at FAMU but found "I just couldn't handle it." She dropped out and lived with her mother. Eventually, she met her husband, a student at FAMU, and they were married in 1961. Her first two children were born in Tallahassee, before her husband landed a job in Michigan.

They lived in Michigan 20 years before moving to their present location. Owens, now retired, worked as a teacher's aide in Michigan and later at a credit union. Owens remembers a visit home to Tallahassee, when she ran into a woman she had known in college but hadn't seen in years.

"I said, 'Don't I know you?'" She said, "Yes, you're that girl who was raped." Owens recalled ruefully, "What a way to greet someone after 20 years."

About five years ago, Owens' grandson was attending FAMU when he learned about the rape case in a class. He told his mother, Owens' daughter, who went online, found McGuire's essay and other stories and asked her mother to explain. Owens called all her children together and told them about the incident for the first time.

"Everyone was devastated and hurt, more hurt I think because I didn't tell them about it before," Owens said. "But it was something I didn't think they needed to hear at the time. I put it on the back burner. I didn't want to talk about it."

McGuire understands Owens' reluctance. When writing her master's thesis, McGuire was herself a victim of date rape. Her assailants were not charged and McGuire was devastated. She learned "Owens' shackles women with shame and embarrassment and turns them inward." But by writing about Owens, she found the "ability to move on."

She is now married and the mother of two children.

Writing about Owens also inspired her to do more research about black women sexually assaulted by white men during the 1950s and 1960s. Her book shines a light on their contribution to the civil rights movement and has garnered much praise.

"(Owens') courage to speak out encouraged me to speak out," McGuire said. "I wouldn't have had that strength, if I wasn't channeling her strength."

Owens doesn't feel any particular heroism. She simply did what she felt she had to do.

"I won't lie. I was scared. I was scared for my family. But it was something I had to do," she said. "God prepares you for the things you have to do. I was thankful He kept me alive."