North Carolina Former Governor Exonerates Wilmington Ten

Raleigh, NC – It is done. Ben Chavis, Connie Tindall, Marvin “Chili” Patrick, Wayne Moore, Reginald Epps, Jerry Jacobs, James “Bun” McKay, Willie Earl Vereen, William “Joe” Wright Jr. and Ann Shepard will no longer stand convicted of arson and conspiracy. The Wilmington Ten have been exonerated.

After 40 years of struggle the 10 men and women whose names were sullied and whose lives were snatched from them by a racist legal system have received a full pardon from Former Democratic Governor Beverly Perdue. It has been one of her last acts as governor, and perhaps one of her most notable. “In evaluating these petitions for clemency, it is important to separate fact from rumor and innuendo. I have decided to grant these pardons because the more facts I have learned about the Wilmington Ten, the more appalled I have become about the manner in which their convictions were obtained,” Perdue stated.

This action not only clears the names of the men and women wrongly convicted of the 1971 firebombing of a white grocery store in Wilmington, North Carolina. It also begins to repair the harsh image North Carolina suffers as a state notorious for its racism.

It is the birthplace of Sen. Jesse Helms, and the epitome of Southern racism. It is home to the Woolworth lunch counter where A&T students launched a non-violent sit-in movement that swept the South in the sixties. It is among the infamous states that sponsored the notorious eugenics program that illegally sterilized countless Blacks and others deemed unfit to procreate. Not until April 2003, under Governor Mike Easley, did North Carolina apologize to the victims of this hateful crime, and today still wrestles with the decision to compensate them.

So it is no small victory that the state of North Carolina finally stands up and acknowledges the wrong done to the Wilmington Ten. The decision comes too late for four of those convicted, who died without ever having the truth be known. The decision took too long for those who struggled to correct the record.

There were many who would not let North Carolina rest. Among them are the NAACP, The Wilmington Journal and other Black Publishers, The Wilmington 10 Committee, the Wilmington Star, the New York Times, MSNBC, celebrities such as Russell Simmons, attorneys James Ferguson and Irv Joyner and many more.

While it will not wipe away the legacy of racism and injustice in the state, this dark chapter in North Carolina’s history will read better now that the truth is told.

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