

Human Rights Banquet will feature noted prosecutor

Taryn Brodwater / Staff writer

If you go

What: Ninth annual Human Rights Banquet

When: March 20. Reception at 6 p.m., banquet at 7.

Where: The Coeur d'Alene Inn, 414 W. Appleway, Coeur d'Alene

Tickets: \$25, purchase in advance. Make checks payable to Human Rights Education Institute. Mail payment to HREI, P.O. Box 2725, Coeur d'Alene, ID 83816.

Information: Tony Stewart, (208) 769-3325

More than 40 years after three civil rights workers were killed, the state of Mississippi last summer convicted Klansman Edgar Ray Killen of planning the crimes.

Tony Stewart watched closing arguments in the trial on TV and immediately drew parallels between that case and a 2000 civil suit in North Idaho against the Aryan Nations.

Mississippi Attorney General Jim Hood, the lead prosecutor in Killen's trial, reminded Stewart of Morris Dees – the civil rights lawyer who won a \$6.3 million judgment that bankrupted the Aryan Nations.

Stewart was so impressed with Hood he booked him as the keynote speaker for the March 20 Human Rights Banquet in Coeur d'Alene. Hood's presentation will focus on the Mississippi case and the Kootenai County civil suit.

"In both cases, the juries said no to hate and to crime," said Stewart, a North Idaho College political science instructor and member of the Kootenai County Task Force on Human Relations.

When Hood helped resurrect the case against Killen, which had ended 40 years earlier in a hung jury, he was subjected to a great deal of criticism.

"There was a large group that felt like, 'You're going to dredge that back up and people will have a bad image of Mississippi again,'" Hood said.

When Killen was convicted of manslaughter for the 1964 murders, Hood said, the sentiment changed.

“After the trial, I realized the impact it really had on people,” Hood said. “They have come to me and said, ‘You just don’t know how much that meant for our image in Mississippi.’ It was a chapter that needed to be closed in Mississippi.”

Stewart said Idaho had similar image problems because of its association with the white supremacist Aryan Nations. The victories in both cases sent “a national message,” Stewart said.

The Human Rights Banquet will include a celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Kootenai County Task Force on Human Relations – complete with a 25-foot cake.

The event is a fundraiser for the Human Rights Education Institute, the task force’s educational arm. Two scholarships to North Idaho College are awarded at each year’s banquet using proceeds from the event.

Stewart said two civil rights awards will be handed out, as well. One, named in memory of civil rights activist Bill Wassmuth, will be awarded to the task force’s volunteer of the year.

This is the ninth year for the banquet. The event is held the same week as NIC’s annual Popcorn Forum, a weeklong convocation series at the college.

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