

**Houston PBS**  
**“A Mother’s Account:**  
**The Stella Byrd Interview”**

Jasper, Texas, white supremacist, John William King, has been sentenced to death for his role in the murder of 49 year old James Byrd, Jr. For two weeks the jury has been subjected to testimony and evidence so gruesome—

His body was found in pieces in the outskirts of town, had been beaten, chained to the back of Berry’s truck and dragged for three miles. According to—

On June 7, 1998, three white men from the town of Jasper, Texas brutally murdered African-American, James Byrd Jr., by chaining him to the back of a pickup truck and dragging him three miles. When the dismembered body was found, it refocused America and the world’s attention on the fact that racism and hate still exist. Hello, I am Ernie Manouse. Over the next 30 minutes, we will talk with James’ mother, Mrs. Stella Byrd, about what it is like to live through a personal tragedy while in the public eye. How one copes with such a crime and what we can all learn from this tragedy. Often when a much-publicized crime takes place people forget that the victim was a real person with a family that is hurting from the loss. We are very pleased today to be joined by Mrs. Byrd. Hello there.

Mrs. Byrd: Hi.

Ernie M.: Does there ever come a time when the pain starts to go away, when you can get back to your daily live?

Mrs. Byrd: Sometimes. When you think you got it all made, then they will probably show something on television or something in the newspaper refreshen it all over and over again. You just have to take one day at a time.

Ernie M.: Is it difficult when you see, like we came up to day in a TV truck, when you see yet another one coming in front of your house. Does that bring back too much?

Mrs. Byrd.: Memories, yes it does. It brings back memories because sometime I can’t even stand to see a pickup truck, you know, because that’s what they used when they killed him and at times I can see it. I got tapes here now with him playing the piano, but I haven’t been able to watch it, not yet. But, hopefully, some day I can gradually put it al behind me.

Ernie M.: I heard that some of your children can’t even have pictures of him up around the house because it’s too hard to remember.

Mrs. Byrd: Yes. It’s like – you know he was around and so he’s missed very much. That’s the reason we haven’t had anymore family reunions because it’s just – a part of you is just missing. I guess it always will be like that. I just had two boys and all the rest

girls. And, so he was the third child and the girls, most of all, just looked up to him for different things because he was the big brother over sisters. And he was just keep you laughing. He was liked people. And he’s very missed. I look for him to – I stayed in denial about, about quite two years. I still didn’t believe it really was happening. I just looked at that door looking for him to come in and gradually I had to come to the reality that he really was gone. But, the public never will let you forget it – about it.

Ernie M.: Do you wish that it hadn’t been so publicized? Do you wish that what had happened had stayed quiet?

Mrs. Byrd: No, in a way I do and in a way I don’t because the world really did need to know about this hatred and prejudice. And then I hope something that was said or something that we done might would help someone else who have this same tragedy. And tell them, you know, what they have to do is try to pull through it. You have to have a deep root in God to come through a tragedy like this because you don’t want to grow up in this world continue hating. So, only God can ease that part. And then you see by them boxes of mail, and I still get mail, encouraging letters from both colors, overseas, and lots from here and that helps a lot.

Ernie M.: It must be odd out of something with so much hate, yet you find so many people who never knew your family, that shows so much love.

Mrs. Byrd: Yes. He used to laugh and tell us all the time and say he was going to put Jasper on the map. And I think he did and I think he put the world on the map. It’s so many people that really did benefit from his death. So, now they have his picture in some textbooks. And then Rice University, they give a scholarship every year and then a foundation give a scholarship, just to keep his memory alive, just to think of the good – goodness come out of it. And hoping they would, especially the young people, don’t strive on the hate part of it. Thinking some good – I can live through it if I know some good come out of it.

Ernie M.: Take me back. What was it like raising your eight children here in Jasper?

Mrs. Byrd: Well, it wasn’t too hard. Back in those days your neighbors and all the elder people would help you raise your children, not like today. Clara was the valedictorian of her class. Melinda was the valedictorian of her class and they always made good grades and did wonderful in school. They said I was – they say Mama, you were too hard on us. I say, no I wasn’t. I want you to be able to contribute something to society. I had one boy, the baby boy, he moved from Dallas back here. And, so that helped a lot. But nobody can fill the place of my other son.

Ernie M.: When everything happened, when all of this happened back in June a few years back, how did you hear about it?

Mrs. Byrd: The sheriff and Billie Rose, and one of the police come told me – I had seen him, he was here to a shower the night before. He said, I’ll see you tomorrow and someone called and said they found some body out there in Hub Creek. I didn’t have the least idea it was him. And, so about – that afternoon about one or two when Sheriff Rose and this deputy and another guy come and told us what happened. It made it so hard, you know. Saw him one minute – he was almost home when it happened to him. Almost about – he stayed across town, but he was about a block from that church.

Ernie M.: How do you handle the anger that would come from hearing something like that?

Mrs. Byrd: It’s one of the preachers from, I believe up around – sent me some tapes and he had tape that really did fit my occasion. Most times I go and put that tape in, Pass Me Not and He’s Sweet I Know, and I play that tape until that moment pass over because you can’t help – you think about it, you know, you get angry because I’m human. And then I have to really trust in the Lord because lots of people that we really did trust and you then realize how they took advantage of you. And it was people, the magazines and thing was coming before day and didn’t care how we felt, don’t seem like, want a statement, three and four o’clock in the morning. The phone rang day and night. They really didn’t seem to care really what we were going through. They want a story or taking pictures where they can make a document, just all kind of different stuff and half of them would write and pass out things. One lady called with that other book, Rice book, and I told her I wasn’t interested no book and she wrote all that - half that stuff is not true she wrote in it. Then you have to deal with all that and then deal with the tragedy of his death.

Ernie M.: How soon after you heard what had happened to James did the whole, and I hate to use the word circus, but all of the stuff started happening. How long did you have just for your family to know about this?

Mrs. Byrd: Oh, it happened that Sunday, they caught the man that same day and the word spread. We didn’t have no peace and I did get to the church to the funeral we couldn’t hardly – they had to make room for us to get up in there. It just looked like to me they turned it into a circus, seem like. And, then they had food over to the school. They didn’t ask us anything, just did what they want to, people did what they want to do until the lady called and said, you got some bills down here and charged it to me. They had a big old tent down in the church. They got a tent and all that stuff and we didn’t know a thing about it.

Ernie M.: There was a lot of press about a lot of famous people that came through – that came down here. How were they?

Mrs. Byrd: They were fine.

Ernie M.: Did they come and bring peace and help or was it more attention grabbing?

Mrs. Byrd: Not with Jessie Jackson, he was real nice. He sure was and most of them in the – President Clinton, he had me a phone, that phone here, put in. I had a phone direct to the White House, talked to Reno and him. And, they were real nice and Senator Kennedy, he called me a lot and then, what’s her name, all of them Senators, most of the Senators called me and talked. It helped a lot. And so when things weren’t going exactly right – things wouldn’t go right, if I want all I had to do was pick up the phone and call the White House.

Ernie M.: Most people can’t do that.

Mrs. Byrd: Sure did, well, he had been calling couldn’t get through, so he just ordered them and told them to put me another line, put me a phone in. But, see God prepared me to go through all this stuff way down the road. I wasn’t prepared for this, I wouldn’t been able because it was coming from every end. Some of them was coming want to destroy Jasper and some of them was coming to build it up. And I said, no, I don’t nobody else to go through what I’m going through and what good would it do to burn up the town. People won’t have no job and my son still wouldn’t be back. So, all we ever wanted was peace and justice. That’s all we ever asked for.

Ernie M.: Did you ever get that?

Mrs. Byrd: Partially, partially. We got the justice, it’s partial justice, but just keep something else always going for the peace.

Ernie M.: You didn’t attend the trials. Your husband did, but you chose not to.

Mrs. Byrd: I was there, but I went one time, I just couldn’t go anymore.

Ernie M.: Was it too difficult?

Mrs. Byrd: Uh-hunh. My kids and my sisters and my husband, they went every – when I went to Bryan, I went – I did (inaudible) for about an hour and that was it.

Ernie M.: At some point in all of this you became in a sense a political activist, not ever seeking it, but the attention came – how do you deal with something like that? You weren’t trained for it, you hadn’t planned it.

Mrs. Byrd: I just continued to be myself. That’s what I did, I just – what you see is what you get, so I just, you know, it didn’t pump me up like it did with lots of people, you know. I just stayed the same. And I know that something was history and I just had

to endure it until I just stopped lots of reporters and magazines. I just had enough of it. I just stopped it.

Ernie M.: Is there ever a point where you can separate the name James Byrd, Jr. from the person you knew?

Mrs. Byrd: No. I just can’t. He will always be James Byrd, Jr. and son to me regardless of what they name after him and purely just my child. That’s the way I see it, just was my child.

Ernie M.: What does it mean to you to see that the Texas Hate Crime Bill and Law now has your son’s name on it?

Mrs. Byrd: I feel real good about it. That’s one good thing that come out of it and I felt real good about. It took them a couple of years, but that was good, maybe somebody would think before they do somebody else like that. You would have to prove so much to get any kind of conviction with the other law. You have to prove they were kidnapped. You have to prove they was all kind of things, but under this law you don’t have to prove all that to prove it was a hate crime. But, since then – even after then they went to his grave and they took his name tag from cross there and put some stickers on there and said the Klu Klux Klansman been here. They did all that.

Ernie M.: I want to take you back to the Hate Crime Legislation for a minute and there was a story that had circulated about problems getting it passed, and they came and talked to you. Can you tell me about that?

Mrs. Byrd: Yes, they wanted to take out the protection, you know, was the lesbian and gay was one thing. They had protection in that Bill for them and anybody else, they wanted to take that part out and pass it. I told them that still would be hate. They couldn’t pass a Bill to protect everybody I just didn’t want it. And so that next day they went on and passed it. I say that wouldn’t be right, even what a person is they still needed protection. You don’t do things to people because they are not like you or your color ain’t alike or whether they’re gay or lesbian and all that. That’s between them and God. So, they kept it in there and so it passed. They sent a car – sent a limousine at us and we flew to Austin twice. I had to go twice. And so I went back when he signed the Bill. I got his picture I there and I told him one of these days I’ll give that pin to his grandchild.

Ernie M.: How sweet.

Mrs. Byrd: Because she often – when she was coming would ask where was he at and I said, baby – then I couldn’t tell her what happened. And said, well, some good come out of it

Ernie M.: What would you say you have learned from yourself from all of this that’s happened?

Mrs. Byrd: Well, I learned that one thing, it’s sad to say, but you just can’t totally trust – put all your trust in everybody that comes because lots of them really just – some things they said disappointed me. And I just trust in the Lord and ask Him to guide you and He won’t lead you wrong.

Ernie M.: How do you relax today?

Mrs. Byrd: It’s someone – I still take time and try to, I get lots of letters from people. They write now and having different problems and want a suggestion what I would do and sometime I just cut out different readings and good readings and poems and mail it to them. There are lots of young people in Houston in rehab. Somebody call me or I’ll get them a card or something and send it to them trying to make their day. I found out doing something for other people helps me forget my trouble. And God knows we have had since all this come up. My husband and I both, you know, are in kind of bad health. Like I say, we just take one day at time.

Ernie M.: Now, Christian teachings teach us to forgive people who do wrong unto us. Is there any part of you that can forgive the three men that did what they did to your son?

Mrs. Byrd: Yes.

Ernie M.: How?

Mrs. Byrd: It’s hard, like I say, it’s hard – it’s hard. We asked for justice to be done and really and the Bible tells you if you don’t forgive others He won’t forgive you. And I searched down in my heart and I make all kind of excuses and ask the Lord to give me one reason why I shouldn’t hate them. And I heard a man preach on the television, he said, they done Jesus worse than that and say with those throngs in His flesh, say He looked down and said Lord forgive them they know what they’re doing. I say, well, now Jesus could do that, I’m not like Jesus and I pray to give me the strength that I don’t walk around every day wishing something happen to them, with hate. But, really I’m not ready to become a bosom friend, you know.

Ernie M.: Why do you stay in Jasper? After all that happened why didn’t you move?

Mrs. Byrd: That’s a good question. I don’t know why. I guess I’ve been here so long and I never did like too big a crowd and we both love to fish. When we were able to go and have, you know, things like that. And then some of the people here were kind of nice to us. And I know you can’t run away from your trouble. I say I’ll stay here and face them. I like to go to his grave up there. And once and a while I like to go

down there and put some flowers on the park. And if I wasn’t here I couldn’t do that. It was really hard the first time I went. The second time – I haven’t been now in about six months. Looks like its been harder this month on me. I say, I got to make up my mind, I got to go up there to it, you know. I like to keep flowers and keep things. If I had the chance just to see him it wouldn’t be so – I didn’t have no closure, you know. And, so it makes a big difference, a big difference.

Ernie M.: Was it hard for you when all of the attention moved away. As much as you say it’s difficult to have all of the camera crews and the famous people coming by and all that, but when they all stopped coming. Did that all of a sudden seem like a big emptiness suddenly?

Mrs. Byrd: In a way, I need time to heal and it’s given me a chance to heal. All along, it was different ones, some of them never did stop writing. But, with so much – we didn’t have a chance to – we need our healing process. And, I began – they didn’t stop on their on, I began to just turn them away and say no.

Ernie M.: Do you have hope for your grandchildren to grow up in a better world?

Mrs. Byrd: I do.

Ernie M.: Do you think they’ll see that?

Mrs. Byrd: I don’t know. They got – you know, some of them got to get – got to do better they own self, you know. Really, the world don’t owe you anything. Opportunity is out there. You get you an education or something and, you know, and work. I taught all my children to work and some of these grandchildren, they want everything on a silver platter and that part I don’t like. That part I don’t like. And I just hope they realize what they’re doing and get on the right track because, you know, money ain’t everything, is it?

Ernie M.: No.

Mrs. Byrd: It helps you to live, but you have to be careful how you get it.

Ernie M.: Mrs. Byrd, thank you very much for talking with us.

Mrs. Byrd: Glad you come.

What we all feel about this tragedy can probably best be summed up in a sympathy card the Byrd family received from a total stranger. It reads,

“To the family of James Byrd, Jr., I want to express my sincere sympathy for your loss. I find it hard to comprehend how anyone can

have that much hate in their heart to commit such an unspeakable act of violence. No amount of punishment they receive will equal what they’ve done. Those of us who believe in God know that He alone has final judgment and that He will surely condemn them to burn in hell forever. Again, please accept my condolences. I truly hope that this horrible act will open people’s eyes and bring our country, your town, and family all close to one another in compassion and love. May God bless your family in this tragedy.”

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