

January 4, 2017

Senator Grassley
Chairman, Committee on Judiciary
224 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Feinstein
Ranking Member, Committee on Judiciary
152 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Sir or Madam:

My name is Evelyn Hatch Turner. I live in Marion, Alabama. I was married to Albert Turner, who was the Field Director for Dr. Martin Luther King in the state of Alabama in the 1960s. In 1963, Albert Turner took the leadership in organizing the Perry County Civic League. We organized out in the woods because we were afraid to meet in town. Black people were mistreated throughout the county. The police chief and the high sheriff were brutal. Fear was used to keep black people in their place. Everything in Perry County was segregated. And only a few Black people were allowed to register to vote. A white "well to do" citizen had to vouch for a black person in order for the person to register. We couldn't even enter the front door of the courthouse. We had to go around the back. We couldn't serve on juries or serve in any electoral capacity. The Perry County Civic League was organized to fight for our rights as American citizens.

The Civic League wrote hundreds of letters to the Justice Department for help. Nicholas Kazenbach was sent by Attorney General Robert Kennedy. He also sent federal registrars down to the Marion post office. They worked in the basement. Consequently, 300 or so Black persons were registered to vote. In 1964, SCLC came to Perry County to help us. By 1965, a movement was underway in Perry County and throughout the Black Belt. The tragic death of Jimmy Lee Jackson happened in Marion at the Mack's Café. Jimmy Lee was trying to protect his grandparents and his mother. His death triggered the Selma to Montgomery March and Bloody Sunday. Albert Turner had led a night march to protect Rev. James Orange from being lynched. Albert also helped organized and lead the Selma to Montgomery March and was a victim along with Congressman John Lewis and others of unmitigated violence. Six months later, the Voting Rights Act was signed into the law by Lyndon Johnson.

It was still hard to elect black elected officials because of fraud, trickery and the fear of violent retaliation. Finally, Blacks began to be elected to public office. As black political power strengthened, resistance to that progress intensified. My husband, Albert Turner, continued to give the county strong leadership. In the early 1980s, Jeff Sessions, the Attorney General, focused on eliminating or minimizing black political power in the Alabama Black Belt, which is majority African American. The level of black voter participation in Perry County was the highest in the state and perhaps the nation. I believe that's why we were targeted. By arresting us, the plan was to discourage black people from voting. After the Civil War, Klan violence was used to strip black men of their voting rights. Arrest and jail was the new tactic and Jeff Session, I believe, was the architect and implementer. Albert, Spencer Hogue and I were arrested because of our successful political activism. Jeff Sessions made it clear: he wanted the maximum sentence for all of us. We were law abiding American citizens with no history of criminal activity. We became known as the Marion 3. In spite of jury racial bias at that time, an integrated jury found us not guilty on all counts. During the trial, citizens called to testify against us by Jeff Sessions, told stories of how Albert and the Civic League had saved them. We took people to the doctor, fed them when they needed food. We registered them to vote.

Last year, I and other were invited to Washington to be honored as foot soldiers of the movement. While there, Jeff Sessions attempted to speak to me. He did not attempt to apologize. I reminded him that he tried to give me, Albert Turner and Spencer Hogue 254 years in jail for trumped up charges. If he had changed, he would have expressed some regret for his malicious prosecution of the "Marion 3". I am now 80 years old. Albert died on April 13, 2000. Spencer Hogue died September 18, 2016. My dear Albert was willing to plead guilty for crimes he didn't commit to keep me from going to jail. I wouldn't let him do it. I knew we were innocent. I knew that Jeff Sessions was a leftover from days when violence and any other means was used to keep Black people from the ballot box. He failed then. But now, as Attorney General, he can use his power to negatively impact voting rights laws and voting rights activists across the nation. I am very troubled by his stance against civil rights in the more recent past. As a U.S. Senator, he supported no laws or causes which suggest that he has changed.

Initially, I refused to give interviews to the media about my Jeff Sessions experience. I was convinced by friends that our story must be told and preserved. After all of these years, my stomach still aches when I think of the pain he caused so many people. When I think of him as the Attorney General, I literally ache inside for America. He will not only be dangerous for African Americans but for freedom loving people, Black, Brown and White people throughout the world. I remember Assistant Attorney General Kazenbach as an honorable and just man. He was sent by Attorney General Robert Kennedy. It would be a great step backwards for our democracy to have Jeff Sessions serving in that same office as America struggles to strengthen its democratic goal of "Justice for All".


Evelyn Turner