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First U.S. Truth Commission to Hold Second Hearing August 26-27

On Friday and Saturday of next week, August 26-27, 2005, the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission (GTRC) will hold the second of three public hearings during which speakers will tell their stories about what happened on and after November 3, 1979.

The Commission was established to examine the events of November 3, 1979, when members of the Ku Klux Klan and American Nazi Party opened fire on a racially mixed gathering of political activists and labor organizers, killing five and wounding 10 others. Seldom seen footage of the traumatic event, including the rally, will be featured in the hearing.

Public hearings have become a common feature of truth-seeking processes around the world, most recently in Ghana, Peru, Sierra Leone, and Timor-Leste, but these are the first such hearings to be held in the United States. Public hearings are not trials; they are conducted more informally and can cover broader ground than a criminal or civil case. Their aim is usually not to uncover previously unknown information, but to share with the public information that the truth commission has gathered and to encourage further public engagement with the truth-seeking process. Through public hearings, society as a whole can be part of the important debate about its own past, the abuses that were committed, their origins and causes, and the safeguards that must be put in place to prevent the repetition of such abuses.

The Commission—the first in the United States—was seated and its commissioners were sworn in on June 12, 2004. In January 2005, the Commission began taking statements from individuals with information related to the events of that day. This statement-taking process, along with the review of documents and other sources of information, is expected to continue for several more months. The GTRC's research will lead to a final report setting out its findings, and recommending possible paths toward reconciliation and healing. That report is expected in spring 2006.

The International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) has served as an adviser to the organizers of the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission and currently provides technical assistance to the Commission and its staff, as it has in similar efforts worldwide. For further information or to schedule an interview with Lisa Magarrell, the Center's lead adviser to the Commission, please contact ICTJ's Director of Communications, Suzana Grego, at 917.438.9331 or sgrego@ictj.org.

For additional information about the public hearings in Greensboro on August 26-27, please refer to the Commission's press release below and contact Joya Wesley.

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GREENSBORO TRUTH COMMISSION TO HOLD SECOND HEARING AUG. 26-27

GREENSBORO, N.C. — North Carolina A&T State University, whose students launched the national Sit-In Movement in 1960, will host the historic Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission's second public hearing, 2-9 p.m. Friday, Aug. 26, and 9 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 27, in the McNair Hall Auditorium.

The much-anticipated hearing, which comes a little more than a month after a successful first hearing that was featured in hundreds of newspapers and magazines around the world, will allow this generation's A&T students to play a role in launching what participants and supporters believe will become a truth and reconciliation movement in the United States.

Speakers, whose names will be released Aug. 25, will tell their stories relating to the hearing's topical question, "What happened on, and after, Nov. 3, 1979?" Community divisions exploded in violence on that day, ending with Klan and Nazi members killing five labor organizers and wounding ten others at a rally organized by the Communist Workers Party (CWP).

The Commission is modeled on truth-seeking efforts in South Africa, Peru and elsewhere, where public hearings have increased understanding of events and surrounding social issues. They offer a rare opportunity to hear diverse voices sharing — uninterrupted and in their own words — personal, human experiences of traumatic events. Hearings have proven healing for groups as well as individuals.

The first hearing in Greensboro, held July 15-16, was no exception. It attracted an audience of nearly 400, including some 50 journalists who provided broad local, national and international coverage. Speakers included current and former members of the Ku Klux Klan, former members of the CWP who survived the shootings, community activists and an array of scholars who provided important contextual information answering that hearing's topic, "What brought us to Nov. 3, 1979?"

The first hearing's success created a lasting buzz and increased support for and participation in the Commission's work. Growing numbers of Greensboro citizens believe the process can bring clarity and healing to a situation where both are badly needed.

This hearing will feature a presentation of the footage that television news cameras captured of the traumatic event, including seldom seen footage of the beginnings of the rally. The hearing also will feature speakers who will address lingering community questions about the subsequent trials. All defendants were acquitted in state and federal trials; however, a civil trial found that Klansmen, Nazis and members of the Greensboro Police Department were jointly liable for one count of wrongful death.

The A&T campus sponsor is the speech division of the journalism and mass communication department.

"We are a very socially alert division and we find it important to get our students involved with issues that are driving our community — and this is truly driving our community," says Dr. Myra Shird, director of the speech division.

Created through a democratic grassroots effort initiated by survivors of the shooting and other concerned community members, the Commission has drawn criticism from those — including many city leaders — who distrust the effort or believe no good can come from revisiting the tragedy. In April, over the vocal objections of its three black members, the City Council voted 6-3 to oppose the Commission's work.

Despite that decision, the Commission has so far taken some 100 statements — the oral or written individual stories of people who experienced Nov. 3, 1979, in various ways. People with insights on background issues such as race, economics, labor, political organizing and police-community relations also are being urged to make statements.

A final hearing, Sept. 30-Oct. 1 at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, will focus on the question, "What does the past have to do with the present and future?" The three planned hearings, as well as a concluding report and various other community forums, will give voice to the community's collective experience of the shootings and their aftermath. The report, to be completed in spring 2006, also will include specific recommendations for the Greensboro community and its institutions for concrete healing, reconciliation and restorative justice.

The International Center for Transitional Justice (www.ictj.org), an organization founded by one of the architects of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, is serving as a consultant for the Commission, as it has for similar efforts in nations including Ghana, Sierra Leone and Timor-Leste (East Timor).

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