

HELL NIGHT THAT

Att'ys on both sides go back down mean streets

AS THE SUN goes down over Queens, the two men who battled each other in the Howard Beach race trial 20 years ago meet at the scene of the crime that changed their careers. And maybe the City of New York.

This is last week, and Brooklyn District Attorney Charles (Joe) Hynes and defense attorney Stephen Murphy stand in front of the New Park Pizzeria on Cross Bay Blvd. and 157 Ave. in Howard Beach, where on the night of Dec. 19, 1986, a dozen white teens brandishing baseball bats and other weapons and shouting racial epithets surrounded three black men whose car had broken down in this predominantly white neighborhood, then best known as the home of mob boss John Gotti.

By night's end, one black man was chased to his death on the Belt Parkway and another was brutally attacked.

"It started right here," says Hynes, sweeping his hand across the boulevard decorated for Christmas. "An unspeakable incident out of the Deep South right here in Queens."

"I'd been involved in a lot of high-profile trials as a prosecutor and defense attorney," says Murphy. "But this was the most intense case I had ever been involved in. I was on TV every night. One witness spit at me from the stand. I received death threats."

That night 20 years ago three black pedestrians — Cedric Sandiford, his stepson Michael Griffith and Timothy Grimes — were called "f— n—" by a white kid named Jon Lester who passed them in a car when they were crossing Cross Bay Blvd. Lester then returned to a boozey birthday party to announce to his white pals, "N— on the boulevard. Let's go get them."

A dozen teens piled into three cars and tracked down the three black men to the New Park Pizzeria.

Two decades later, Hynes looked north to where Grimes sprinted and outdistanced the mob along Cross Bay Blvd.

Murphy pointed to where Sandiford and Griffith ran across six lanes of traffic and up 157th Ave.

Then Griffith ran down 90th St., pursued by Lester, Scott Kern and Jason Ladone and made the fatal choice of hopping a small guardrail and sprinting across the Belt Parkway, where an off-duty correction officer named Dominic Blum hit and killed him in the westbound lane with his 1979 Dodge Aspen.

After watching Griffith die,



DENIS HAMILL

the relentless white mob then tracked Sandiford to 86th St. and Belt Parkway. Here, as Christmas lights twinkled on the middle-class homes, the white guys savagely beat Sandiford with a baseball bat, tree limbs and a tire iron because of the color of his skin as he pleaded for his life, telling them he had kids their age.

In those monstrous moments, the most liberal city in America was ripped asunder by race. The headline stories and the fiery trial that followed captured the national imagination and "Howard Beach" became a catch phrase for urban American racial division.

Then-Gov. Mario Cuomo appointed Hynes as a special prosecutor, and he slugged it out with lead defense attorney Murphy throughout that trial in front of flinty, no-nonsense Judge Thomas Demakos.

"Murphy and Hynes were both excellent in that trial," says Demakos.

"But the incident almost led to long-term division of the city of New York between whites and blacks."

When Murphy brought in the only acquittal for his defendant, Michael Pirone, it fired a booster rocket on his already successful career.

"I wasn't surprised, because Murphy was the best cross-examiner I ever saw," says Hynes.

When Hynes delivered manslaughter and assault convictions on the other three defendants, it propelled him into his job as Brooklyn district attorney.

"Like the city, I was at war with myself," says Murphy. "I'm a defense attorney, but I'm a liberal. The racial aspect of the case disturbed me but I had a job to do."

"During the trial, at Joe Hynes' suggestion, I approached Michael Griffith's mother, Jean Griffith Sandiford, a truly kind and heartbroken woman, and told her how sorry I was about her son. I apologized for what I



Jean Griffith Sandiford, who works for Brooklyn DA Charles Hynes, holds photo of son Michael Griffith, killed 20 years ago in Howard Beach, Queens.

had to do in the courtroom. She said she understood and she appreciated my gesture."

MOM WITH NO HATE

Today, living in Canarsie, Brooklyn, four exits on the Belt Parkway and 5.1 miles from the spot where her son was killed, Jean Griffith Sandiford, who works for Hynes at the Brooklyn DA's office, sits in her dining room in her two-family home with her eldest son, Chris. A Christmas tree glistens in the living room, where family photos, including some of Michael, adorn the walls.

"I don't hold any hate in my

heart," Sandiford says. "Jason Ladone has apologized to me personally. He's been in trouble since he got out of jail with drugs. I pray he gets help. Jon Lester wrote me a letter from jail after Cedric died of AIDS in 1991 saying how sorry he was. I believe him and accept it."

In that jailhouse letter, Lester wrote, "Mrs. Griffith. I hope that you will accept my sympathy for the loss of your husband... I have wanted to write to you since the trial. I remember you always there and I often thought of the pain it caused you. I wanted to say to you then what I will now; that I am sorry for any trou-

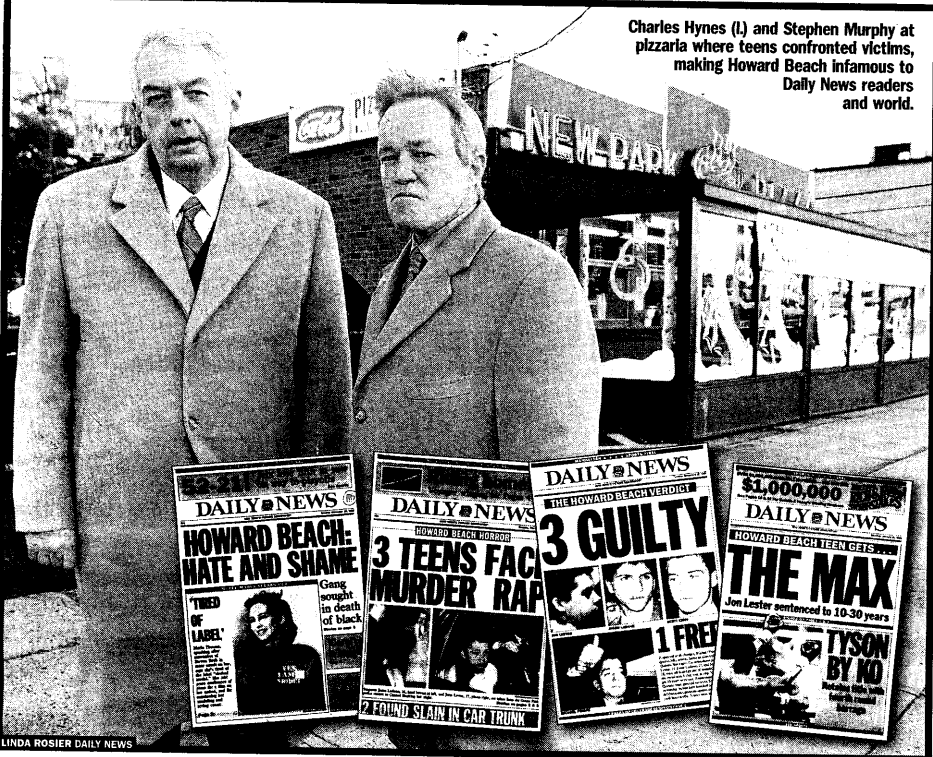
ble that I may have caused you, Cedric and the rest of your family..."

When asked what has changed in the 20 years since Michael's death, Sandiford smiles softly and says, "I don't know, but I just hope that parents teach their children to love other people, no matter what color they are. There are good black people and bad. Good white people and bad."

"I believe the city is somewhat better," adds Chris Griffith. "John Gotti is no longer the boss of Howard Beach. I think a lot of people would have testified and showed support, but they were

CHANGED N.Y.C.

HOWARD BEACH
20 YEARS
LATER



Charles Hynes (l.) and Stephen Murphy at pizzeria where teens confronted victims, making Howard Beach infamous to Daily News readers and world.

VICTIMS AND TORMENTORS

MICHAEL GRIFFITH

Griffith, a 23-year-old construction worker, was chased by a gang of white youths onto the Belt Parkway, where he was struck and killed by a car. He had been living with his mother, Jean, and her fiancé, Cedric Sandiford.



CEDRIC SANDIFORD

The 36-year-old Army veteran was working as a mechanic and construction worker. Sandiford, an immigrant from Guyana, died in 1991 from an AIDS-related illness. He was 41. A year before his death, Sandiford said, "I have not said one bad word about anybody in Howard Beach because I know there are good people over there."



TIMOTHY GRIMES

A 23-year-old unemployed furniture mover with an arrest record, Grimes outran the gang in Howard Beach. But he was convicted in 1989 of shooting his brother in the face with a shotgun and sentenced to 14 years in prison. He has since been convicted of three more assaults on inmates and will be up for parole in 2008.



JON LESTER

The gang's baby-faced ringleader, Lester, 17, was in a car that nearly struck Griffith, Sandiford and Grimes. He hurled a racial slur, yelling "Kill the n—s!" Sentenced to up to 30 years in prison, Lester was released in 2001 and deported to his native England. While behind bars, Lester said he had "guilt dreams." In 2001, he told a British newspaper that he was not a racist, saying he had a Bangladeshi girlfriend.



JASON LADONE

Ladone, who was 17 at the time of the attack, was convicted of manslaughter in the death of Griffith and first-degree assault for beating Sandiford. He was released in April 2000 after serving 10 years. Earlier this year, cops busted him sleeping in a car — allegedly with a crack pipe resting on the center console.



SCOTT KERN

Sentenced to six to 18 years in prison, he was released in 2002. His mom, Carol Kern, told a newspaper in 1996 that during the prosecution, "our family was made to look like racists, and we're not."



"But we still have incidents of racial bigotry that manifests in language, slurs and beatings. So sometimes I wanna believe, yeah, man, we're making progress. And then something happens, and you wonder if we are. I think the Fat Nick case proves that, 20 years later, Howard Beach is still not the safest place for a black man to walk at night."

Reminded that sometimes blacks attack whites in racial incidents, Daughtry said, "It isn't pretty no matter what color does it."

SEMINAL MOMENT

In the back room of New Park Pizzeria, no one seems to recognize Hynes and Murphy. The kids behind the counter were probably not even born the night Michael Griffith ate his final slice of pizza here.

"I think that case was probably a seminal moment," says Hynes. "Because it got incredible attention. Other than the murder of Yusef Hawkins in Bensonhurst a few years after Howard Beach and [of] Yankel Rosenbaum in Crown Heights, there've been few cases that reached the same level. I think that having a bias unit in

the Police Department brought change. That we have community policing is a big change."

Hynes nods when asked about the Nick Minucci case and other incidents like black-on-white hate crimes in Marine Park and Harlem, where four black teens chased a white NYU student who was killed by a car on 125th St.

"Terrible," he says. "But they don't reach the same level of theatrical impact."

"I think the city's learned from Howard Beach," says Murphy. "I know I certainly have. It's gonna take hell or high water to get me involved in a case like that again. To begin with, like I said, I'm a liberal and I don't like being called a 'racist' by the people I'd normally be representing."

Do they think that three black men walking down Cross Bay Blvd. would now be safe?

"Yeah," says Hynes. "Absolutely. The city has changed in these 20 years. It's safer in every aspect."

"Would they be viewed with suspicion?" Murphy asks. "Yeah. Sure. Would white kids run to a party and say, 'N— on the boulevard, let's get them'? I don't think so. Partly because

the big organized crime guys these kids used to hero-worship are now dead or doing time."

Judge Demakos says, "I think three black guys walking down Cross Bay Blvd. would be safe today."

It's interesting that the white prosecutor, defense attorney and judge involved in the case think the city has changed enough in 20 years for black men to walk safely at night through Howard Beach. The black men I ask don't think so. That certainly speaks volumes about where we are 20 years after Howard Beach.

"This is a good city, a great city," says Jean Griffith Sandiford as she prepares for her 20th Christmas without her son Michael. "I just wish that one day everybody, no matter what nationality, what color, they will be able to live together in harmony."

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REMEMBERING HOWARD BEACH

Hynes, Koch and Sharpton look back
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afraid back then. We got many letters of sympathy from former Howard Beach residents. We're Catholics, but we never even heard from a priest from Howard Beach."

"The city is better but not completely changed. There are many neighborhoods where you still see racism. I've only gone to Howard Beach once since my brother was killed. I didn't feel comfortable at all."

Would he feel comfortable walking at night along Cross Bay Blvd. this Dec. 19?

"No," he said. "No way. I wouldn't feel safe."

But Griffith mentions that Stephen Murphy has regularly attended memorial services for Michael Griffith at the Rev. Herbert Daughtry's House of the Lord church in Brooklyn in the years since, including one last month.

"I think much has changed and a lot hasn't since that day," says Daughtry. "Because the next generation gave us Fat Nick [Minucci] beating Glenn Moore because he was a black man in Howard Beach. So we still have these kinds of incidents. Not as dramatic, or traumatic, as in the case of Michael Griffith."

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