

Bethea-Shields, Karen: In Joan Little's Cell ^[1]

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Karen Bethea-Shields: In Joan Little's Cell

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 1/12/2003. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

On the day she passed her bar exam in 1974, Karen Galloway, now Karen Bethea-Shields, was named co-counsel in the first-degree murder trial of Joan Little. It became one of the most controversial civil rights cases in U.S. history. Little, a 19-year-old black woman, had stabbed her jailer to death with an ice pick in Washington, N.C. She claimed he was sexually assaulting her.

On the face of it, the case was a simple murder trial, but Bethea-Shields and the rest of Little's defense team saw it differently. Led by native son Jerry Paul, they turned the trial toward a question that was far from simple: Did a black woman in the American South finally have the right to defend herself against a sexual assault by a white man? Heated, often moving, always sensational, the trial made front-page headlines around the world.

Bethea-Shields told me that her upbringing in Method, an African-American community since annexed to Raleigh, prepared her for the trial of Joan Little. "I came from a home full of love, full of high expectations, but also a whole lot of faith," she said. She was one of the first black students at Broughton High School, one of the first black women to graduate from Duke University Law School and one of the state's first black judges. We talked at her law office in downtown Durham.



Karen Bethea-Shields. Photo by Chris Seward, 2003. To request permission to use this photo, please contact the News & Observer.

Joan Little lived in little Washington, North Carolina, Beaufort County. She was very young, cute, a tiny, tiny little girl. She was from a poor family and she was a survivor. She knew the streets. She was not a pretty person to deal with. I'm not There was a jailer named Clarence Alligood, who was 62 years old. He had a reputation of asking sexual favors from the female inmates after bringing them treats. He would give them these little treats and then at some point ask them to pay This particular night, and it was in August '74, Joan was the only female inmate in the women's section. Alligood was the only jailer on duty. He went into the women's section with an ice pick. He went into the cell where Joan was and told her Alligood sat on the cot and made her ... It was rape. At some point, he relaxed his hand, the ice pick fell out, she got the ice pick, they struggled, she was able to stab him multiple times. He fell, and when he fell she went to the next cell, grab Joan knew that nobody was going to believe her. Alligood had already told her that. He told her that "nobody is going to believe you. There's no use you yelling." And she knew that was true. No one was going to believe her. She's in jail. She' My former mother-in-law was so scared that something was going to happen to Joan. She had never heard of a black woman accusing a white man of doing something and not ending up dead. And so the reason why Joan runs is because si She hid out for a while in the black community. She was hidden by an old black man in the community. They came and searched his place at least twice, but they never found her. A friend of Joan's contacted Jerry Paul, and he and a profess Joan was facing the death penalty. Then Dr. Page Hudson, the state medical examiner, called Jerry when he did the autopsy. He said, "You need to look at this." Based on the autopsy report, he said there's more here than Alligood dying in t We had a dead jailer with his pants down and proof of sexual misconduct, which they kind of forgot to tell when it was first announced to the public. And you only had one stab wound that was fatal. The rest were defense wounds, and the wa We worked on preparing her case for about a year. I had to go see Joan every day when she was at the prison in Raleigh. At some points we were very, very close. I thought she needed a friend, someone who believed in her. Oh, we were lil When it came time for jury argument, I didn't write anything down. I just felt it and gave the jury argument. What I did was put the jury in Joan's cell the night of the rape and made them feel what she felt. Yes, she was a convicted felon. Yes, s When I got up in court, we had a taped-off area that showed really how small the jail cell was, so I gave my arguments from the jail cell, the little box area. I put the jurors into her body and gave her story. I asked them to imagine themselves a As I gave the argument, some of the jurors started crying. Remember now, I'm young. This is my first jury argument. I thought I had done something wrong. And when I finished, the courtroom was silent. Nobody was saying anything and the The verdict was not guilty. And when I finished, I went straight to the bathroom and just cried and cried and cried."

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