

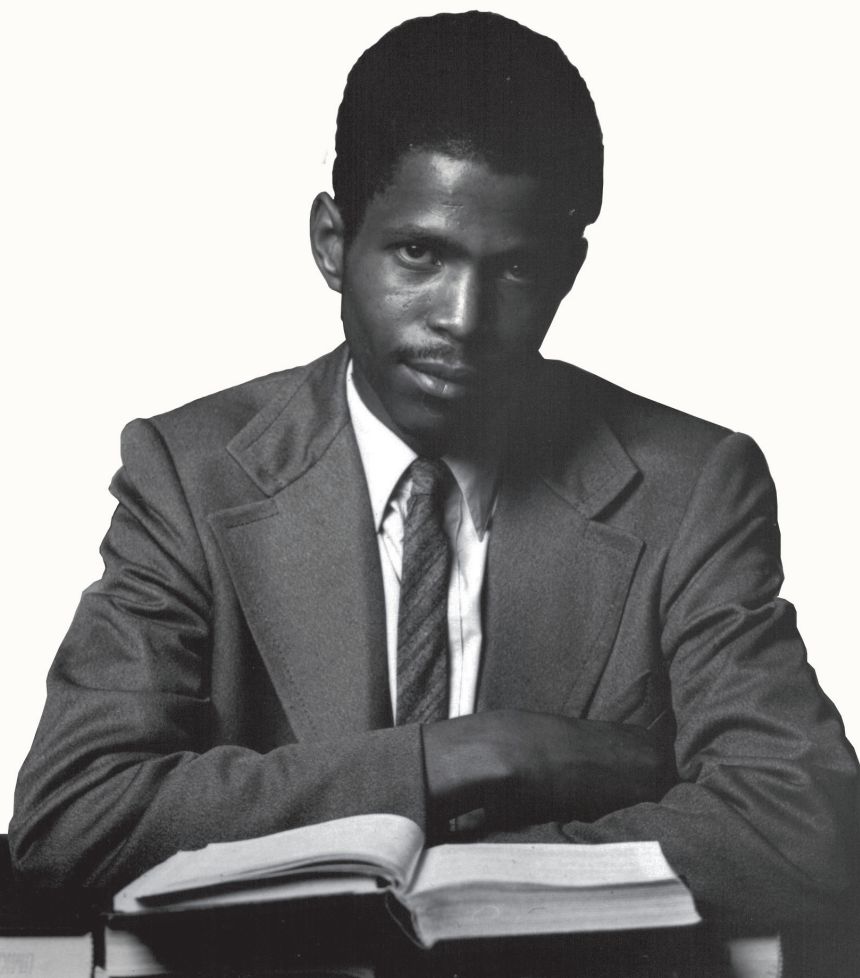
THE KANSAS CITY PUBLIC LIBRARY

# PURSUIT OF TRUTH

*From Kansas City's libraries, Alvin Sykes plotted  
an unlikely course to civil rights history*

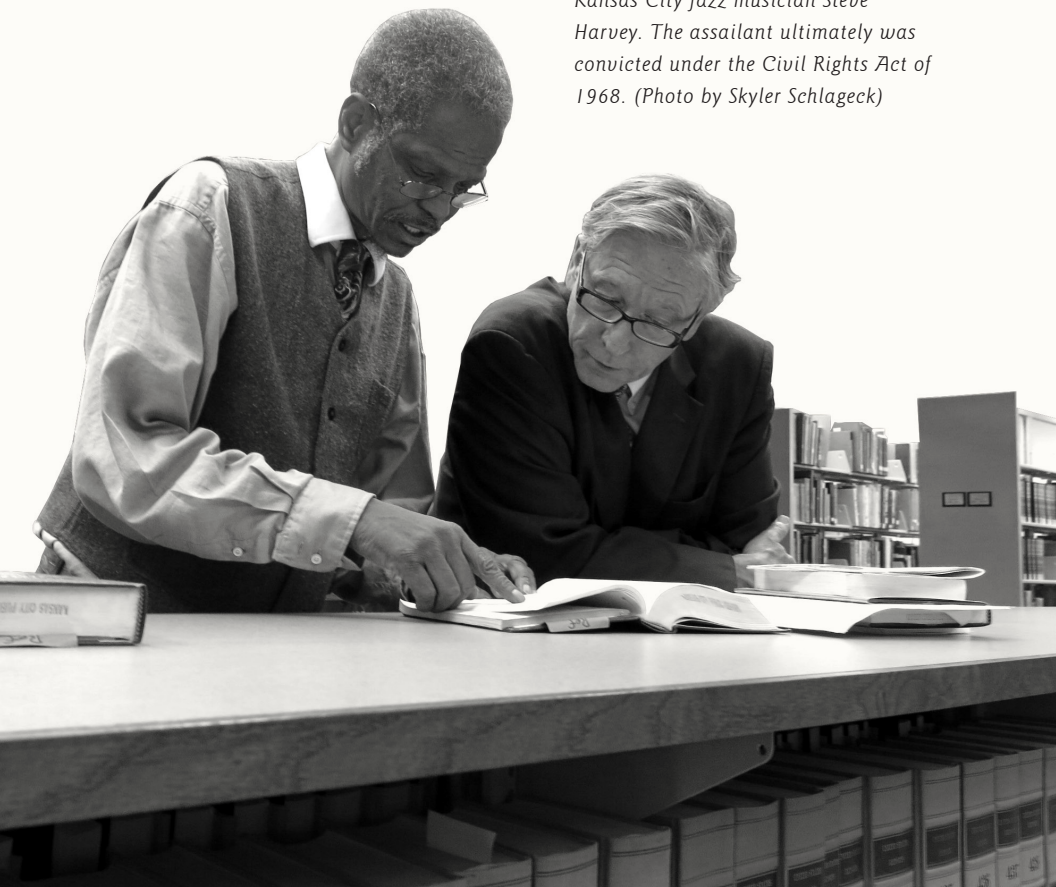


by Monroe Dodd



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*In his home away from home – the reference services section of the Kansas City Public Library – Alvin Sykes, left, takes Library Director Crosby Kemper III back to the source of his first civil rights triumph: a passage he discovered in the U.S. Code that gave federal officials an opening to enter the 1980 case involving murdered Kansas City jazz musician Steve Harvey. The assailant ultimately was convicted under the Civil Rights Act of 1968. (Photo by Skyler Schlageck)*



# PURSUIT OF TRUTH

*From Kansas City's libraries, Alvin Sykes plotted  
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## Foreward

*“Truth for me had been so evasive and changing. That’s why it  
became so important for me to find out the whole truth  
throughout life.” – Alvin Sykes*

Alvin Sykes’ mission in life, a mission accomplished at the Kansas City Public Library and other public libraries, in the halls of the U.S. Justice Department, and on the streets, is an absolute quest for justice based on the truth.

In the library world of the 21st century, we sometimes get caught up in our democratic, egalitarian version of the search for truth, that each and every version is equal or all are relative. I prefer Alvin Sykes’ conviction that justice and truth are partners and, if we work hard enough, they can become whole.

When I first met Alvin in the Central Library, I could tell he was driven and focused. He lived in the Library – sometimes, I thought, literally because he didn’t seem to have a permanent home. He talked about living on his friends’ sofas. He certainly had, and has, permanent friends, and no wonder. His soft-spoken intensity is combined with a smile and warmth that can disguise his dogged, deeply infused passion.

Alvin had told me some of his story when we talked in our Library cafe and in the stacks. But I didn’t know the whole story until he arranged – typical of Alvin, he arranged – for C-SPAN to cover his Kansas City Public Library program about his work on the Steve Harvey murder case, the Emmett Till murder, and the bill that established a cold-case section in the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice. Alvin, as Monroe Dodd tells us in this amazing story, doesn’t take “no” for an answer. He takes it as a challenge.

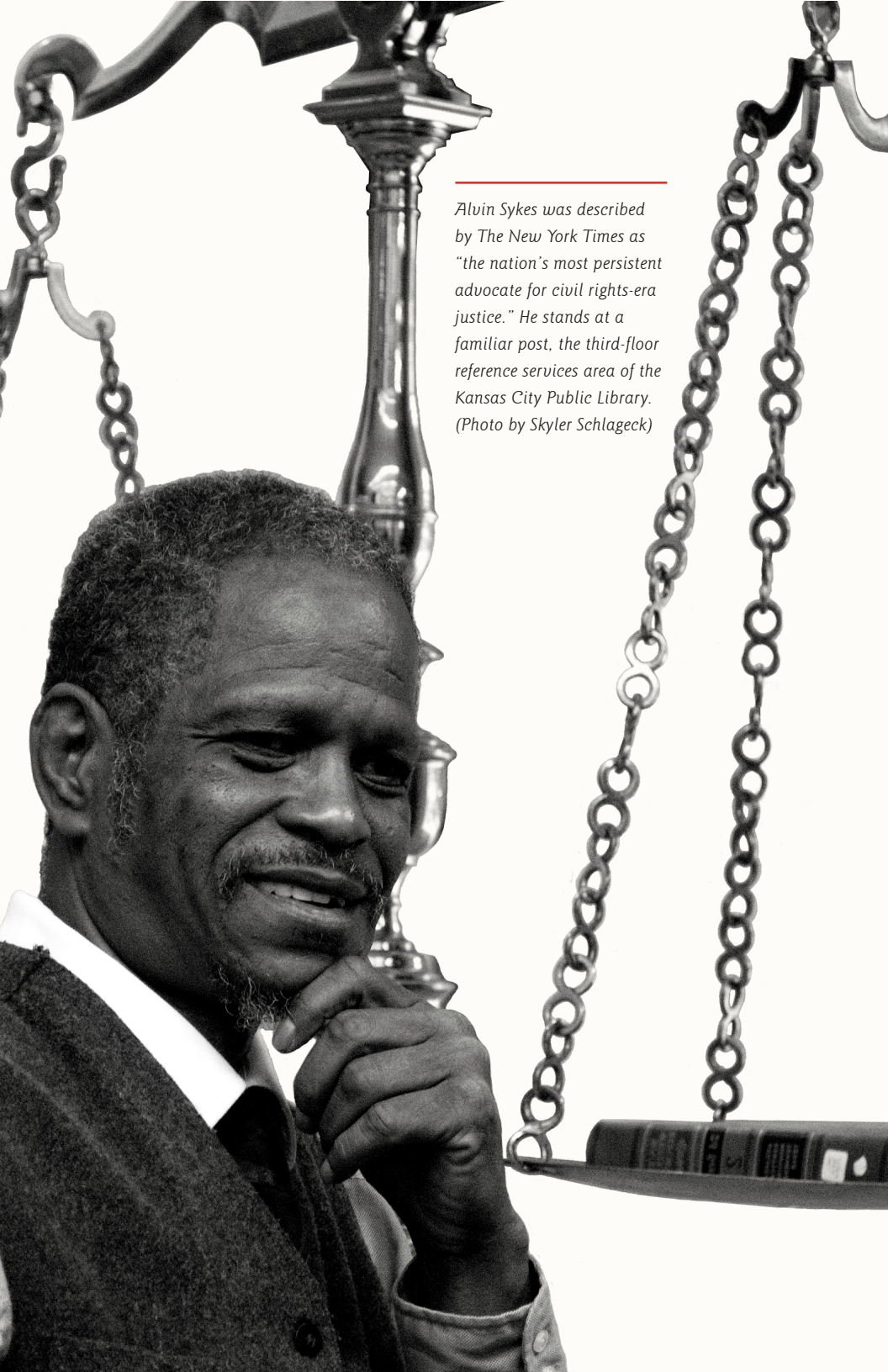
This is not just Alvin’s story or the story of a civil rights triumph, as important as that is. It is also a story of the meaning of citizenship and the importance of libraries to citizen scholars and activists like Alvin Sykes – who, appropriately, became the Kansas City Public Library’s 2013 Scholar in Residence. We are proud of our role in this story. And that’s the truth.

**R. Crosby Kemper III**

Director

The Kansas City Public Library

January 2014



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*Alvin Sykes was described by The New York Times as "the nation's most persistent advocate for civil rights-era justice." He stands at a familiar post, the third-floor reference services area of the Kansas City Public Library. (Photo by Skyler Schlageck)*

## Eight Fateful Words

When he pursues justice, Alvin Sykes sometimes takes the bus and sometimes gets a ride in a friend's car. Many times, he walks. At some point in any trip, likely as not, he'll push past plate glass doors and into the heart of a public library.

There he proceeds to his tools — rows of books and banks of computer monitors. With them, he builds arguments on behalf of the poor, weak, and unjustly treated, and carries their cases to the offices of bureaucrats, police chiefs, mayors, legislators, and United States senators. His work is legend among the downtrodden and also among the powerful because, in his pursuit of justice, he gets his facts right, frames his arguments persuasively, and simply won't give up.

Most of his life, Sykes has had plenty of work to do but little steady employment. He has lived with friends and people who support his efforts. He dresses in simple clothes that show considerable wear. You may find him on bleak streets and in tiny homes or housing projects, or talking with the U.S. Attorney General, or testifying before Congress. And when he's not in those places, you're likely to find him in a library.

The library. He calls it "the great equalizer."

It's a rainy summer afternoon and, inside a library in Kansas City, Alvin Sykes is demonstrating his work. He goes to one end of a long room that houses shelf after shelf of law books, and from the next-to-last aisle pulls out a volume. It is hardbound in a durable maroon cover, the same size and appearance as scores of other books on either side. All are labeled *United States Code Annotated*. He opens Volume 18 and turns without hesitation to Section 245, containing a phrase he came upon more than three decades ago, one that engraved his legend in legal and civil rights circles:

*Whether or not acting under color of law ...*

Those words, which he found at the Kansas City Public Library, paved the way for the U.S. Department of Justice to enter the case of an up-and-coming black jazz musician who had been beaten to death by a white man in a city park in 1980. By the time Sykes started poring through the law books, county prosecutors already had taken the victim's white attacker to trial on a state charge of murder. He had been acquitted by an all-white jury.

Relentlessly, Sykes pushed for a federal investigation. When he was done, the assailant went to prison for violating the musician's civil rights.

Alvin Sykes accomplished that and much, much more with no law degree, no undergraduate degree, and no high-school diploma or GED. He received his last certificate of graduation in the eighth grade. The next year, he dropped out of school.

"I transferred," he likes to say, "to the public library."



If law books – supplemented now by computer searches – are his tools, his talents start with a probing mind; from an early age he was encouraged to absorb everything he could through reading. Also in his repertoire are an incredible persistence, a willingness to learn, and an estimable ability to persuade. In the past decade, those skills helped push through a federal law empowering the Justice Department to investigate long-ago cases of civil rights violations. It's called the Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crime Act, or the Till Bill. Enshrined in news articles, speeches on the U.S. Senate floor, and in the hearts of victims' families, the Till Bill is probably the greatest of his multitude of achievements. To which Sykes, now in his 50s, might add: the greatest – so far.

The passion that carried Alvin Sykes through the doors of the library and into the world of the law, then into the arena of human rights, continues unabated. From time to time, he has declared to himself and friends that he will take it easier on the legal stuff, dabble in other pursuits, return to earlier interests. But at this stage of his life, Sykes acknowledges, that is probably not going to happen.



## Moved by a Murder

Before taking on injustice, Alvin Sykes' passion was music. When he was a child, the woman who cared for him mortgaged her home to pay his medical bills and buy a baby grand piano. He took up the keyboard along with other instruments, and embarked on what he thought would be a life of making music. But Sykes' plans changed, as often happens in youth, and he moved into music's business side, becoming the manager of a local band, Threatening Weather, that included his cousin, Alonzo "Scooter" Powell. He made business acquaintances and friends.

One of those friends was a young jazz woodwind player named Steve Harvey.

Paying gigs were available for talented musicians, and Steve Harvey played them – jazz, blues, R&B. Yet even when there was no pay, Harvey made music. Late at night, after playing at this club or that, he would take his saxophone and flute to city parks and street corners so as not to wake his neighbors and play in the dark for no one in particular. Then he'd pack up his instruments and return home.

Late the night of November 4, 1980, after watching presidential election returns on television, the 27-year-old Harvey went to the Liberty Memorial. Its tower and plaza, dedicated to those who served in World War I, are set atop a hill in a sweeping, city-owned open space called Penn Valley Park. Since its dedication in the 1920s, the memorial has provided a beautiful view of Kansas City's downtown, particularly at night. Over the years, it also

developed a reputation as a hangout for some members of Kansas City's gay community. That made it a convenient target for homophobes looking for someone to harass.

One such thug was 19-year-old Raymond Bledsoe, who with a couple of pals drove to the park that same November night, armed with a thick wooden dowel rod and a baseball bat and meaning to attack whomever they could, figuring that just about anyone there at the time would be homosexual. They found their quarry in a restroom, where they struck a gay white man with the dowel rod. He ran from the restroom, and the three let him go.

In an adjacent restroom, they came upon Steve Harvey. Harvey was not gay, but Raymond Bledsoe did not know that; for him, it was enough that he was there. Harvey aroused another of Bledsoe's prejudices: He was black.

Harvey ran, but Bledsoe did not let him go as he had the white man. He pursued the musician to the middle of a field and struck him on the head, over and over, until he had crushed Harvey's skull. Bledsoe and his compatriots left him there. Harvey's body was found the next morning. Also found was his car. Inside were his saxophone and flute.

**ALVIN SYKES REMEMBERS HOW HE FELT: "YOU GONNA KILL ONE OF THE SONGBIRDS AND THEN WALK OUT? NO."**

Word of the death spread quickly among local musicians, who regarded Harvey highly. Coincidentally during the preceding two years, several other Kansas City-area musicians had been assaulted. It was the targeting of another performer, more than the civil rights overtones of the Harvey case, that initially drew in Sykes.

A little more than nine months later, on August 12, 1981, Sykes picked up a copy of *The Kansas City Times* and read that Raymond Bledsoe's trial in the slaying of Steve Harvey was over. Prosecutors had cut deals for Bledsoe's two pals to testify against him, but the jury – all drawn from Jackson County and all white – questioned the pair's credibility and found Bledsoe not guilty.

The U.S. Constitution's prohibition against double jeopardy meant that Bledsoe could not be tried for murder a second time. Now, it seemed, no one would be punished for Harvey's death.

Alvin Sykes remembers how he felt: "You gonna kill one of the songbirds and then walk out? No."

He telephoned the Justice Department in Washington, and asked what federal authorities could do. The staffer at the other end gave him this answer: Nothing. The department, she said, had no jurisdiction in the matter because Harvey had not been a public official and neither had his assailants.

Sykes finds few things more inspiring to his work than a "no."

He turned to a friend of several years, Don Burger. They had met in the late

1970s when Sykes was taking part in protests and Burger worked as a mediator in the Justice Department's Community Relations Service in Kansas City, Kansas. Burger had a one-word opinion about the response Sykes got from the Justice Department. He uttered it strongly in the barnyard version: *Bull—!*

At that very moment, Burger pointed out, the Justice Department was investigating the case of two black men who were killed while they jogged with two white women in a Salt Lake City public park. No one in that case was a public official, but the Justice Department found jurisdiction to pursue federal charges that the joggers' civil rights had been violated.

Sykes, his confidence bolstered, headed to downtown Kansas City, Missouri, and the Public Library, then at 12th and McGee streets. With him went Harvey's widow, Rhea Harvey, though her family worried it might be dangerous to join his crusade. As she stood by, Sykes pored through page after page of the U.S. Code.

The day wore on, long and discouraging. Rhea Harvey felt the tedium. Sykes, lifted by her mere presence, kept plugging away.

Then came what Sykes recalls as "the last 10 minutes" of an eight-hour effort. He was examining the Civil Rights Act of 1968, section by section.

"What I saw," he says, "were the first words, 'whether or not acting under color of law,' and that part was enough for me." Sykes knew then that the person who answered the phone at the Justice Department was wrong. The man who attacked Steve Harvey did not have to be a policeman or other public official for the law to apply. The assailant was not operating "under color of law," but the phrase "whether or not" meant that it simply did not matter.

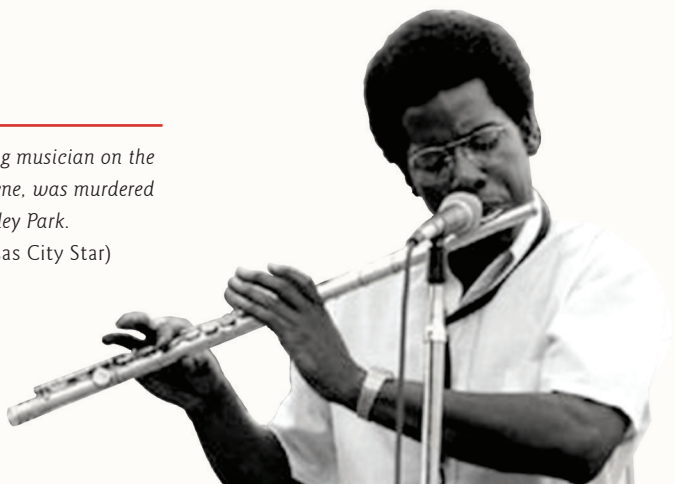
Piecing together various sections and subsections, Sykes found that the law spelled out a number of instances when people were afforded federal protection from injury, intimidation, or interference because of race, color, religion, or national origin.

Notably among them: while "participating in or enjoying any benefit, service, privilege, program, facility or activity provided or administered by any State or subdivision thereof."

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*Steve Harvey, a rising musician on the Kansas City jazz scene, was murdered in 1980 in Penn Valley Park.*

*(Photo by The Kansas City Star)*





Steve Harvey was beaten to death in Penn Valley Park – administered by the Parks and Recreation Department of the City of Kansas City, Missouri. Similarly, the park in Salt Lake City where the joggers were slain was a public facility.

Sykes called the Justice Department again, and spoke to the same person who had rejected his argument the first time. This time, he cited volume and section, and she admitted that the matter was “too heavy for me.” As it happened, she was an intern. Sykes, she said, would need to talk to her supervisor.

That’s how Alvin Sykes fixed in his mind a valuable lesson: Know what you’re talking about before you start. Go to the library, gather the things you need, and then use them.

Sykes was transferred to Richard Roberts, then a trial attorney in the Justice Department’s Civil Rights Division.

“Send me everything you can,” Roberts told him. “We may be able to do something because it happened in a park.”

Today, Roberts is Chief Judge of the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia. He recalls that Sykes showed not only persistence but also interest in digging beneath the surface.

“I had not met anybody like Alvin Sykes,” Roberts says. “He wanted to know specifics, the basis of laws, the scope of jurisdiction.”

Alvin Sykes, then only 25 years old, was making waves all the way from Kansas City to the capital of the United States.

One legal requirement for Justice Department prosecution is a demonstration of public interest. Sykes formed the Steve Harvey Justice Campaign, and gathered about 7,000 signatures.

By early 1982, the investigation was well underway. Checking records of a hospital near the Liberty Memorial for the night of Steve Harvey’s slaying, the FBI uncovered the name of the white man who had been beaten and chased from the restroom just before Harvey was attacked. He had not turned up at Bledsoe’s murder trial, but his testimony in a federal civil rights trial could support a case for racial bias. Bledsoe and his pals had let the white man escape, but chased and killed the black man.

Bledsoe had already provided evidence of racial prejudice by telling his girlfriend after the slaying that he had killed a “nigger queer.” After Bledsoe spurned her for her mother, the embittered girlfriend took the story to authorities. Bledsoe had made similar remarks to others, and the prosecution’s witness list grew.

In May 1983, under the section of federal law noted by Alvin Sykes, Raymond Bledsoe was convicted in U.S. District Court in Kansas City of violating Steve Harvey’s civil rights. He was sentenced to life in prison and, after 30 years, that is where he remains. In spring 2013, Bledsoe’s request for mandatory parole was rejected.

Along the way, Sykes also researched the question of Missouri’s jury selection procedures; the all-white jury that acquitted Bledsoe in state court had been chosen from a pool of people age 21 and older pulled from voter

registration rolls. Thinking that too restrictive and potentially limiting the number of minorities, Sykes turned again to the library. There, he found that only Missouri and Mississippi required jurors to be at least 21. Two other states set the age at 19, and the remaining 46 states set it at 18. Through a Kansas City-area state representative, Mary Groves Bland, he helped push a measure through the state's General Assembly lowering the age in Jackson and other large counties to 18 and broadening the pool to anyone with a state identification such as driver's license.

The Steve Harvey case was a signature event in Sykes' career, establishing him in the public mind locally and among lawyers in a wider area as someone to be reckoned with because he unfailingly did his homework. He points proudly to later editions of the U.S. Code in which the original law is followed by citations of *U.S. vs. Bledsoe* in subsequent cases. It would stand as his landmark for two decades.

Sykes turned to other battles, but he never forgot something that Rhea Harvey had mentioned one day. Steve Harvey's death, she said, was the second brutal and notorious hate crime suffered by her extended family. The other had happened in the 1950s, involving a teenager killed while visiting relatives in Mississippi. His name was Emmett Till.



## A First Find: The Truth About Himself

The Alvin Sykes who has become a singular figure in civil and human rights history was born July 21, 1956, but the event was kept under wraps.

He was conceived, he says, in Kansas City, Kansas, but because his natural mother was a teenager and unmarried, she was sent by family friends to a home for unwed mothers in Topeka. After the birth, mother and child returned to the Kansas City area – though not together.

Alvin was taken in by Burnetta F. Page, a domestic worker who lived near 26th Street and Highland Avenue on the East Side of Kansas City, Missouri. He would be a teenager before he knew his birth mother, and was 27 when he saw his father, Vernon Evans, for the first time – lying in a casket at his funeral. Through Alvin's infancy and young boyhood, he believed that Burnetta Page, a widow, was his natural mother and he used her last name. Today, Alvin Sykes still refers to her as Mama.

"She was 48 years old and took on a child that wasn't hers, with no husband still alive," he says of Page. "This woman was extraordinary."

Page saw that the child was fascinated by the world around him. She brought him books and magazines, the subject matter based on her best guess about what he might like.

“She made it seem like fun,” Sykes recalls. “She would read to me; she’d have me read to her. She let me know that I can accomplish anything in life if I learned to read. She saw a lot more in me than I saw in myself.”

Stretches of his childhood were spent in Children’s Mercy Hospital, being treated for epilepsy, and Page took out a mortgage on her home to cover the medical bills. It would be years before Alvin knew what that meant financially to a woman who supported her household by working as a domestic – cleaning, laundering, and otherwise keeping house for people who were better off.

Catering to Alvin’s love of music, Page also used the loan to buy him a trombone, a trumpet, and a baby grand piano. When he wasn’t in the hospital, Sykes recalls, he read, played those instruments, toyed with a chemistry set, or looked through a telescope.

“While other children played around,” he says, “I was scouring the sky.”

Along the way, he developed analytical skills. His first triumph, he recalls, was figuring out after a yearlong investigation that Burnetta Page was actually the Santa Claus who brought him presents. Santa used red ink to address the cards on the Christmas gifts he received. Page, he noticed, used the same red ink.

His curiosity about the world attracted him to the home of a man and woman across the street, a couple whom Page warned him about. Don’t go inside, she said, or I’ll punish you. But the couple offered Alvin candy, and despite Page’s warning he joined them. Once inside, they sexually assaulted him.

“I thought, ‘I don’t understand why they did this,’ ” he recalls. “And what do you do about it? The police were so far away, and I couldn’t go to Mama.”

Page, he knew, would be angry if she found he had disobeyed her warning. He decided to deal with the matter himself, and returned to the couple’s house.

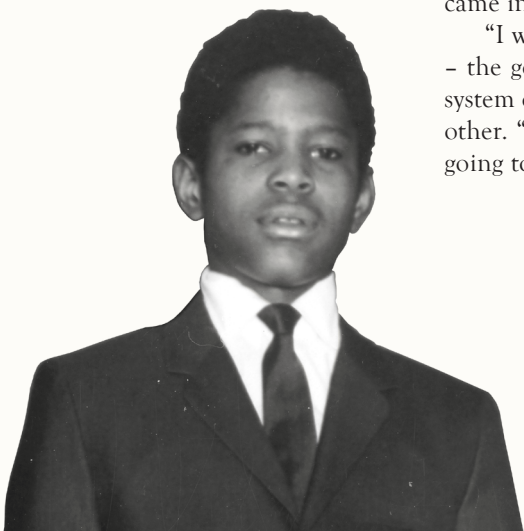
“It just resulted in them attacking me again,” he says. “That’s when I started thinking there needed to be someone between people and law enforcement. Then was when the activism part came into play.

“I would be that type of person for others” – the go-between who worked with the justice system on one hand and injured parties on the other. “But I had absolutely no idea that I was going to do it the rest of my life.”

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*Alvin Sykes spent three years at Boys Town, going then by his birth mother’s name of Page. Olympic track star Jesse Owens spoke at his eighth-grade commencement in 1971.*

*(Photo courtesy of Boys Town)*



Then came April 1968 and the assassination of Martin Luther King. Rioting broke out in cities across the country, including Kansas City. Alvin, 11 years old at the time, watched as entire city blocks went up in flames and people died. To his dismay, the destruction took place mostly where black people lived and shopped – his part of town.

Why, he wondered, was this violence happening after the death of a man who stood for peace? And why wasn't it aimed at parts of town where white people lived and worked?

In the confusion, his sense of justice was shaken and he decided to do something. He formed what he called a community police force and named himself "captain," although the force was "mostly just a friend and I riding around on bicycles." They patrolled neighborhoods, looking for lawbreakers and watching for fires. As they spotted problems, they turned in the miscreants to police who were on patrol during the violence.

Naturally, his actions as a neighborhood crime spotter proved unpopular among the people he turned in. For his protection, Burnetta Page decided to send Alvin away.

Page, a devout Roman Catholic, had brought Alvin up in the church and decided he would go to Boys Town, founded and run by Catholic clergy, on the outskirts of Omaha. He first looked at it as exile, but learned that Boys Town had a choir. He could make music there, which changed his mind.

About that time, the truth about his natural mother emerged. Alvin's sister, Edna, made a vague suggestion during a sibling quarrel.

Alvin went to Page, still the only Mama he had known. She decided that it was time for the truth, which she told in less-than-glowing terms: His birth mother was only a child when he was born, and before and after that she had strayed from the straight and narrow in sundry ways. The news shocked and angered Alvin.

"Truth for me had been so evasive and changing," he says. "That's why it became so important to me to find out the whole truth throughout life."

With a new view of his family, the world, and his place in it, Alvin at age 12 went to Boys Town. He did sing in the choir, and relished the campus' organizational structure. The "town" had its own governing council, own post office, and so on. That fit his burgeoning sense of activism and he stayed three years.

After returning home, a teenager now and still resentful about not knowing his real mother, he moved away from Page and in with his birth mother, Patricia Sykes, in Kansas City, Kansas. He started calling himself Alvin Sykes. The stay was brief. He had never experienced the level of

**"TRUTH FOR ME HAD BEEN SO EVASIVE AND CHANGING. THAT'S WHY IT BECAME SO IMPORTANT TO ME TO FIND OUT THE WHOLE TRUTH THROUGHOUT LIFE." — Alvin Sykes**

poverty in his life, the sort in which hunger was answered only with a bowl of corn flakes and water.

He moved on to another family member, his uncle, Alonzo Powell. Powell and his wife, Jolene, lived near downtown Kansas City, Kansas.

In the summer of 1972, Alvin turned 16. Not long after beginning the school year at Sumner High, he decided school was not for him. He dropped out and began visiting the public library on Minnesota Avenue, typically during school hours. It was only a few blocks' walk from home. Aunt Jolene had told him he could live with Alonzo and her as long as he was in school or had a job so he figured it was best to stay mum and visit the library during school hours.

At the library, he spent his early visits learning more about the music business. He read books and copies of *Billboard* magazine, absorbing facts about what he hoped would be his life's work. He put on a good show, stacking books on other topics around the desk so librarians would figure him for a busy researcher and leave him alone.

After several months, he recalls, "I started to say to myself, 'I'm going to gain my entire knowledge here - math, too.'"

And eventually law. When it came to legal matters: "I usually started out by having a librarian get it. I'd try to charm 'em. A month or two later, they'd see the results in the newspaper."

Sykes had embarked on his life's work.

When the school board in Kansas City, Kansas, proposed closing inner-city schools and assigning black students to far-flung white schools, Sykes suspected a larger scheme was afoot. A local economic development agency had proposed a convention and business complex in the central city and an industrial center in the nearby Fairfax area. Sykes theorized that the desegregation plan was aimed at luring black families out of the urban core so businesses and their employees could move in.

As much as Sykes is inspired by a "no," he is further fueled by an antagonist. He found one in the superintendent of schools, who happened to sit on the economic development agency. At one point in Sykes' protest, the superintendent said publicly that young people had no place arguing about such important matters. Sykes perceived that as an insult to his intelligence.

His youthful campaign did not head off the school and economic development plans, but he did win a concession. The white superintendent was replaced on the economic development board by the black president of the school board.

Along the way, Sykes formed what he called the Youth Action Movement, which never claimed more than a few members besides himself. It was at a meeting of a separate protest group, in the heat of battle over the desegregation plan, that he met the man who would be an important mentor, Don Burger, and make his first connection to the U.S. Department of Justice.

## **‘I know what I am – I’m a human rights worker’**

**W**hat inspires Alvin Sykes? What has made him persistent, even relentless, in fighting for his causes through so many years?

For one thing, during childhood bouts with epilepsy, he resigned himself to the idea he would not live past 18.

“That put in me a sense of urgency about everything I did,” he says.

There is also his faith. Growing up Catholic under Burnetta Page, he attended church and served as an altar boy. Over time, he found Catholicism confusing and began developing his own “one-on-one relationship with God.” At 18, his love for music took him to a performance by keyboardist Herbie Hancock at Kansas City’s Union Station, where Alvin stood near the stage door and heard unusual sounds from within. They turned out to be Hancock chanting his mantra. Sykes introduced himself to Hancock, who introduced Sykes to Buddhism. That faith, Sykes found, agreed with his own feelings about God.

Also, there was Coretta Scott King, Martin Luther King’s widow, whom Sykes went to hear when she spoke at Avila College in Kansas City. After her presentation, Sykes stood in a long line to greet her and, by the time he reached the front, his mind was made up on what to ask. Buddhists, he remembered, believed in world peace.

“Mrs. King,” he said to her, “is world peace possible?”

“If you believe,” she replied.

“That was a complete answer for me,” says Sykes, who by then realized he was going to live into adulthood. “If you believe you can do something, that’s the first step toward achieving it.”

Most of all, Sykes says, he wants to do what is right and find the truth. That’s why public officials, prosecutors, and assistant attorneys general return his calls; in his obsession, he gets his facts down. Yet sometimes the journey in search of truth is a lonely one.

One such trip began in 1985, when the Reagan Administration nominated William Bradford Reynolds as Associate Attorney General, the No. 3 job in the Justice Department. The choice drew immediate fire from many leaders in the black community, who complained that Reynolds, as assistant attorney general for civil rights, had a dim view of affirmative action laws.

As usual, Alvin Sykes did his own research. He found that, under Reynolds, the Civil Rights Division’s aggressive record in criminal enforcement had surpassed that of the previous two presidential administrations. Indeed, Reynolds took up his post in the Justice Department at about the same time that Sykes embarked on his quest to reopen the Steve Harvey case.



Sykes testified on Reynolds' behalf before the Senate Judiciary Committee in Washington. Reynolds' nomination was rejected, but Sykes' effort served him well shortly afterward.

In June 1985, the body of 15-year-old Antoine Weatherspoon was discovered lying in a muddy ravine along State Avenue in Kansas City, Kansas. Events leading up to the teenager's death were slowly pieced together.

On June 5, Antoine and two friends were spotted near the scene of a truck break-in, and the truck's 20-year-old driver went after them. Antoine was fleeing when he fell. The driver pursuing them was the son of a Kansas City, Kansas, policeman, and he called his father to meet him at the scene in an unofficial capacity the next day. Another day went by before a body – Antoine's – was discovered by others and reported. When that happened, the driver's father was the first policeman dispatched to the ravine.

The police investigation found no foul play. Nor did the official autopsy or a second autopsy requested by members of Antoine's family, who suspected the teen's death was not accidental. Then Alvin Sykes weighed in, calling the Department of Justice and asking for a third autopsy by the well-regarded Armed Forces Institute of Pathology in Washington. He asked to meet with the U.S. attorney general, himself, Edwin Meese.

A staffer said that Meese only had time to meet law enforcement officials and heads of state.

"Tell him the caller is the only black man in America who testified for William Bradford Reynolds," Sykes said. And so, in August 1985, he got an audience with Meese. Meese cut through red tape and saw to it that the pathology institute went to work on the case of Antoine Weatherspoon. The Washington group's forensics examination found the earlier autopsies "incomplete and inadequate," and as a result could not determine whether the youth's death was accidental or caused by someone else. Nearly 30 years later, Sykes still refers to the matter as open.

Sykes again found himself running against the wind in the late 1980s, when a small group claiming affiliation with the Ku Klux Klan sought time on Kansas City's public-access television channel. An array of black leaders and the City Council protested, to the point of pushing to end the public-access channel altogether.

Sykes, with others, argued otherwise.

"I told folks: The best way to beat them is to let them in the boxing ring of ideas and then knock them out. If you don't let them in, it looks like you're scared to fight."

That argument prevailed, the white supremacist group was allowed on the air – and lasted one episode.

Through much of the 1980s, Sykes served as the head of the Justice Campaign of America, an outgrowth of the group he started in 1981, the Steve Harvey Justice Campaign. Yet even as his renown grew, people wondered what Sykes' work should be called. The answer came on a trip to a convention of the National Association of Human Rights Workers, an

engagement set up by his longtime friend, Don Burger.

Sykes tells the story of an eagle that fell in with a flock of ducks and began to believe it was a duck, walking and talking like one. One day, other eagles flew overhead and beckoned him to join. The long-earthbound eagle realized what he actually was, and flew away with them.

At Burger's convention, Sykes surveyed the government workers and others in attendance and "it started hitting me," he says. "These people are the eagles, and I know what I am – I'm a human rights worker."

He also learned what those government workers had to endure – budget battles and the like – and decided, "You've got to understand what they go through in order to be effective.

"The lessons I learned," he says, "are what led to the Till Bill."

Indeed, this human rights worker's biggest case was yet to come, and it would require all the persistence, skill, and lessons he had acquired from years of study and negotiation.



## The Emmett Till Case: Taking the National Stage

In the black community, the case of Emmett Till has long resonated. Black men, in particular, used it for years as a cautionary tale: Be careful of how you act around white women, especially in the South.

The story goes back nearly six decades, to the small community of Money in still-segregated Mississippi. In 1955, a 14-year-old Chicago youth named Emmett Till was visiting relatives, and one day he and a cousin went to a store. Tending it that day was a white woman, wife of the store's owner. Emmett gave her a wolf whistle.

A few nights later, Emmett Till and his cousin, Simeon Wright, 12, were asleep in the same bed at the home of Till's uncle when two white men came to the door and respectfully were let in. Leaving Simeon alone, they kidnapped Emmett at gunpoint, forced him into a pickup truck, and drove away. Not long afterward, Emmett Till's mangled body was discovered in the Tallahatchie River, weighted down by a cotton gin fan.

For the youth's funeral in Chicago, his mother insisted that the casket be left open so mourners could see what had happened to her son. *Jet* magazine, widely read in the black community, published an article about the event, accompanied by gruesome photographs of the body.

In Mississippi, the store owner and his half-brother were charged in the slaying and put on trial. The all-white Mississippi jury took a little more than an hour to find them not guilty. Afterward, in an interview with *Look*

magazine, the two acknowledged that they had killed Emmett Till and thrown him in the river.

Despite nationwide outrage in the black community and beyond, no more legal steps were taken. The two acquitted Mississippians were protected by the Double Jeopardy Clause of the Fifth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The Justice Department saw no grounds to intervene. The matter became a part of civil rights lore.

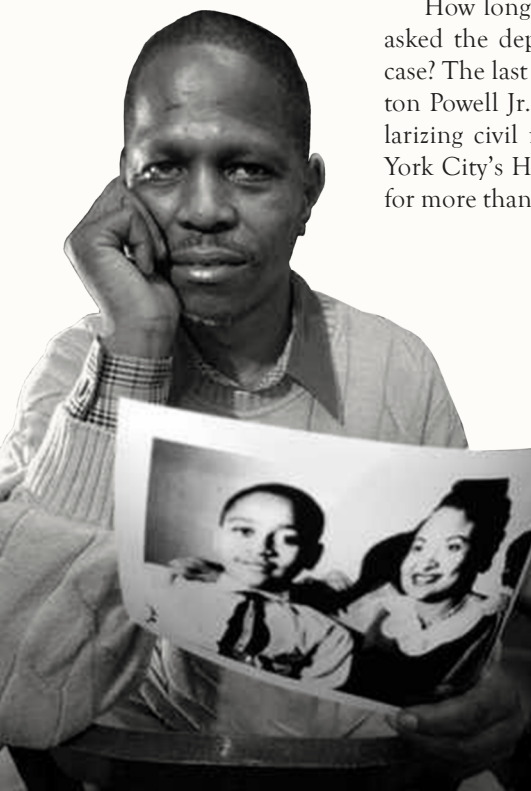
In the late 1990s, two New York filmmakers – Keith Beauchamp and Stanley Nelson – separately took up the cause. Using filmed interviews with Till’s mother, Simeon Wright, and others who had been involved, Beauchamp set to work on a documentary that he hoped would lead to reopening the case. Nelson began chronicling the case in another documentary.

In Kansas City in 2002, Alvin Sykes read about their efforts in *The Call*, a newspaper serving Kansas City’s black community. Sykes also recalled what Steve Harvey’s widow had said about Emmett Till being a relative. Intrigued, Sykes called Emmett Till’s mother, Mamie Till Mobley, and Till’s cousin, Wheeler Parker, with an offer to help.

Sykes went to Chicago, where he and Burger met with Mamie Till Mobley and urged her to approve the formation of an Emmett Till Justice Campaign. She agreed – as it turned out, just seven days before she died of heart failure in January 2003. She was 81. Sykes, Burger and Beauchamp attended her funeral.

“I knew wherever the answer was, it was in the Justice Department,” Sykes recalls. “I didn’t even have to look up the number.”

How long had it been, he inquired, since anyone asked the department to look into the Emmett Till case? The last person, came the reply, was Adam Clayton Powell Jr., the fierce, flamboyant, and highly polarizing civil rights champion who represented New York City’s Harlem neighborhood in the U.S. House for more than a quarter-century. He had died in 1972.



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*Alvin Sykes helped convince federal officials to re-examine the murder of Emmett Till (shown in the photo with his mother, Mamie Till Mobley). A Mississippi grand jury opted against indictments, but Sykes was successful in pushing for the Till Bill and the means to reopen civil rights cold cases.*  
(Photo by The Kansas City Star)

“That’s the thing about these famous cases,” Sykes says. “We get frozen in time and then the case becomes symbolic, which renders people thinking that you can never write future chapters.”

Pressing the Justice Department to explore such a future chapter, Sykes used a finding by a former assistant attorney general named Antonin Scalia, who later ascended to the U.S. Supreme Court. When requests came to reopen the investigation into the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, Scalia had come up with a rationale clearing the Justice Department to pursue long-ago cases in which the quality of the original investigation was in question. Scalia’s logic also was used when the family of Martin Luther King Jr. asked Justice to reopen the case of the minister’s assassination.

Richard Roberts, who advised Sykes in 1981 in both the Steve Harvey and Antoine Weatherspoon matters, had returned to the Justice Department after a stint in private practice. He guided Sykes to the Scalia opinion.

In 2003, Nelson’s film, “The Murder of Emmett Till,” was broadcast on PBS. It was followed one year later by Beauchamp’s documentary, “The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till.”

As the films stirred public interest, Sykes figured out the legal groundwork. Early in 2004, he persuaded the U.S. attorney in Mississippi to schedule a meeting in Oxford with him and other interested parties, along with the district attorney from the area where Emmett Till was slain. Local prosecutors had the power to subpoena witnesses, and Sykes’ aim was to get the federal and state authorities to form a partnership.

Keith Beauchamp attended the session in Oxford, and presented his own findings. Sykes, using the Scalia opinion, handled the arguments for federal jurisdiction and explained how the local district attorney could help. Simeon Wright, who as a 12-year-old had been asleep next to Emmett Till the night of the kidnapping and murder (and who would speak at the Kansas City Public Library about the experience in 2011), drove to Oxford from Chicago.

“Simeon,” Sykes recalls, “spoke eloquently and spiritually, and without anger. He made it real.”

The officials agreed that a new investigation could work but had several concerns, one of them about the cost. Sykes, knowing the level of interest, assured them that the money would be there. The question, though, caused him to consider the longer term.

“That’s when I started thinking about the Till Bill,” Sykes says. “Right there, the seed was planted.”

In May, an assistant attorney general for civil rights announced that the Justice Department and the FBI would re-examine the case.

The question lingered in Sykes’ mind: Where do we get the money to look into other cold cases from the civil rights era?

In 2005, Sykes reached Missouri Sen. Jim Talent through a mutual friend in Kansas City and suggested a bill to establish and fund a unit in the Justice Department to reopen old cases – those arising before 1970. Talent, a Republican, cosponsored the measure with Democratic Sen. Christopher

Dodd of Connecticut. In late 2006, Talent lost his bid for re-election. The bill, however, had plenty of other supporters. Sykes went to Washington to testify on its behalf.

Meanwhile, in April 2006, the FBI turned over its 8,000-page report on the murder of Emmett Till to the district attorney for a three-county area in the Mississippi Delta.

A little more than a year later, the cold-case bill – the Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crime Act – passed 422-2 in the U.S. House. Senate approval seemed certain, too, until Oklahoma’s Tom Coburn exercised his “hold” power, which carried the threat of a filibuster. Coburn argued that there was no need for new money to fund an investigative unit; the Justice Department had the money. Proponents argued otherwise. Progress on the measure came to a halt, and it stayed that way for months.

Sykes decided to take a hand in the matter.

“Neither side was talking to the other,” he recalls. “Here was all this going back and forth in the press. Now, I know what I have to do. I’ve got to bring these people together.”

He called Coburn’s office, starting with the senator’s staff liaison to the Justice Department: “I said, ‘There’s a common denominator between me and the senator. We both want this funded. The question is the method.’”

His arguments worked. Sykes soon got to talk to Coburn directly.

“We went back and forth, taking step by step, and he agreed to drop his opposition,” Sykes says.

On the Senate floor, Coburn credited Sykes for his change of course.

“I wanted to tell you something about America with this bill,” Coburn said, “and it has to do with Alvin Sykes. If you met him, you would immediately fall in love with him. He is poor as a church mouse. He has led this group with integrity. He has been an honest broker. He has not played the first political game with anybody in Washington. As a matter of fact, he has had games played on him and he has been manipulated. But the fact is he has held true to his belief and his commitment to the mother of Emmett Till. And because of that, we are going to see this bill come into fruition.

I think that speaks so well about our country, that one person has truly made a difference. ... I can’t say enough about his stamina, his integrity, his forthrightness, his determination.”

**“HE IS POOR AS A CHURCH MOUSE. HE HAS HAD GAMES PLAYED ON HIM, AND HE HAS BEEN MANIPULATED. BUT THE FACT IS HE HAS HELD TRUE TO HIS BELIEFS AND HIS COMMITMENT TO THE MOTHER OF EMMETT TILL. AND BECAUSE OF THAT, WE ARE GOING TO SEE THIS BILL COME TO FRUITION.”**

— Tom Coburn, U.S. Senator

In the aftermath, law professor Catherine L. Carpenter, writing in the *Buffalo Law Review*, pointed to the Till Bill as one of several laws owing to the persuasive powers of their backers.

“Not everyone is equipped to do this,” she wrote. “It takes a certain skill set and strength of personality.”

As the bill headed toward a final vote, Sykes worried that someone else would come up with an objection. Finally, on the eve of action, Coburn’s office got off a reassuring message to Sykes: “Tell Alvin to go to sleep and get some rest because it’s going to happen in the morning.”

The next morning, as Sykes watched on television in Kansas City, the Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crime Act was enacted, authorizing up to \$13.5 million each year to reopen old cases. It was signed into law by President George W. Bush on October 7, 2008.



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*Less than a year after the Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crime Act was signed into law, Alvin Sykes met in Washington, D.C., in July 2009 with U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder, far left, and Till’s cousin, the Rev. Wheeler Parker, center. They hold a “Tees for Justice” shirt touting the Sykes-led Emmett Till Justice Campaign. (Department of Justice photo)*





## ‘There’s Going to be Something Else’

Many times, Alvin Sykes has soared with eagles and come away with well-publicized victories, but there are more instances that go unnoticed – a case of workplace discrimination here, food stamps denied or an unfair eviction there. Often, he meets the people he helps not at a private office but a public library. In some of those cases, his work is not only unpublicized but also uncompensated.

He never wanted to become a lawyer, despite the prospect of billable hours.

“I love attorneys. I admire attorneys,” he says. “But I felt that by me being a lawyer, I would have to defend people who were guilty.

“If you went strictly by formal qualifications, I wouldn’t even qualify to be a janitor. But I’m one of the best in the world at this. It’s my mission.”

He continues to take his mission seriously, and he continues to have successes. In the past few years, Sykes pushed the Kansas City Police Department to reopen its investigation into the unsolved 1970 slaying of local civil rights leader and politician Leon Jordan. Spurred by Sykes – who again refused to take “no” for an answer – and by evidence uncovered by reporters for *The Kansas City Star*, the police in 2011 issued a 900-page report identifying the mastermind and gunman in the case, who died in 1985.

But not all his battles are successful. Some outcomes can be inconclusive.

The Till Bill contained a section aimed at helping missing and exploited children – a topic touching on Sykes’ own experience – and it has turned out to be one of the measure’s bigger successes. On the other hand, money for investigating civil rights cold cases has been hard to come by. In 2007 a Mississippi grand jury failed to indict anyone in Emmett Till’s slaying. So far, in fact, no one has been prosecuted under the Till Bill, but Sykes maintains that new investigations have helped victims’ families get to the truth.

Antoine Weatherspoon’s death remains, at best, an open matter. And in two years, and Raymond Bledsoe is scheduled to come up for parole in the Steve Harvey case in 2015.

Yet Alvin Sykes remains undaunted.

“If I’d known how hard it would be,” he says of his vocation, “I probably would have backed away. I was 18 and doing it. Wake up, and I’m 28 and doing it. Wake up, and I’m 38 ....”

Now, he is 57 years old. Burnetta Page, Mama, died in 2006 while Sykes was battling for the Emmett Till Act. Jim Talent paid his way to the West Coast to see her in her final days. She was buried in Fort Leavenworth (Kansas) National Cemetery next to her husband, a Navy veteran. Another mainstay in Sykes’ life, Don Burger, his “partner in justice,” died in 2010.

While Sykes still keeps his eye on old cases, he promotes new causes. Based on his research at libraries and other places, he is pushing – through local legislators – measures that would eliminate the statute of limitations

on child sexual abuse in Missouri, reduce the distance for prohibiting electioneering at polling places in Kansas, and toughen standards for witness identification in both states.

Sykes offered personal testimony on behalf of the child sexual abuse bill, sponsored by Missouri state representative Brandon Ellington.

“Alvin has a keen sense of right and wrong, equitable and inequitable,” says state senator David Haley of Kansas City, Kansas, the sponsor of two of the other bills. “He is determined to balance the scales, to achieve – if not always justice – a justice-seeking atmosphere.”

In all of Sykes’ work, inquisitiveness, discipline, and persistence backed by his Buddhist faith are important.

“If I keep moving, keep focused, I’ll get where I want to go,” he says.

Recently, a respected Kansas City lawyer approached Sykes at a memorial service. He leaned over, Sykes says, and told him: “Sykes, I used to pray that you’d become a lawyer. But I stopped doing that because I realized you wouldn’t have accomplished half of what you accomplished had you been a lawyer.”

Sykes plans to chronicle his experiences in an autobiography, tentatively titled “Show Me Justice: The Epic Life Journey of Alvin Page Sykes.” But he believes his story isn’t complete, that much more lies just over the horizon.

“The accomplishments the world will positively remember me for the most, I haven’t even done yet,” he says. “Steve Harvey’s case, the Emmett Till case and bill, those will be accomplishments that contribute. (But) it’s going to be something else – I don’t know what it is, I just know there’ll be something.”

He’ll keep thinking, inquiring and praying, as well as going to the library.

“When I die, the last thing I want to be doing,” he says, “is learning something I didn’t know before.”



## Source Notes

The author obtained much of the information in this article from hours of interviews with Alvin Sykes at the Kansas City Public Library; the Kansas City, Kansas, Public Library; the Law Library at the University of Missouri-Kansas City; and Sykes’ residence in Kansas City, Kansas. Telephone interviews with Richard Roberts and David Haley confirmed important facets of Sykes’ approach to investigations and the law. Tom Coburn’s remarks about Sykes’ importance to the Till Bill were obtained from the *Congressional Record*. Additional details came from profiles and other articles in *The Kansas City Star*, *Pitch Weekly* and *The New York Times*.

## About the Author

Monroe Dodd worked more than three decades as an editor at *The Kansas City Star* and *Kansas City Times*, and has written and edited several books on Kansas City history. He and his wife, Jean, live in Shawnee, Kansas.

## A Note From Alvin Sykes

There was a time when somebody like me wouldn't have been allowed inside a library – or as a black man, permitted to read at all. But I was able to revolve much of my life around the library. I sought and got my education there, and ultimately served as the Kansas City Public Library's first Scholar in Residence in 2013.

It is deeply emotional for me, then, to have my story chronicled on these pages. My formal schooling ended with the eighth grade. This publication, this recognition by the Library, represents the graduation I never had.

I can remember times when I sat inside a McDonald's restaurant, hungry but absorbed in my work, papers spread around me and passersby giving me that look. To them, I was just some guy who'd found a convenient place to hang out.

To those who applaud me now, I ask: Don't turn up your nose at the next guy like me you see at McDonald's, too busy – or maybe too poor – to eat. You don't know what he's working on. It might wind up on the President's desk.

I had help, drawing from the support of three people in particular.

My Mama, Burnetta Page, took me in, gave me love, and constantly told me, "Anything worthwhile takes reading." Herbie Hancock introduced me to Buddhism, now a bedrock of my life, when I was 18, and became my both my spiritual mentor and best friend. Like Mama, he believed in me when others didn't. Without that faith when I was 27 and still not quite sure of myself, without his encouragement throughout the 18-month Steve Harvey Justice Campaign, there wouldn't have been justice for Harvey.

Donald Burger, a great American with a giant heart, was my steadfast partner in justice, sharing practically all of my failures and victories for more than 30 years.

My association with the band Threatening Weather and my growing sense of activism as a member of the Social Action Committee of 20 (SAC-20) positioned me for involvement in the Harvey case. Also instrumental were the Kansas City chapter of the National Black United Front, which I helped found, and the Ad Hoc Group Against Crime.

Chief among my many other sources of local support and influence have been the W.E.B. DuBois Learning Center, which gave me free office space for 30 years, and Buddhism's Soka Gakkai International-USA. Mary Groves Bland, who served in both the Missouri House of Representatives and Senate, current state Rep. Brandon Ellington and Kansas state Sen. David Haley have been important allies on key legislative measures.

They all helped write history.

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