

---

DETROIT STUDENTS DESERVE REAL HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

# DEFEND ARNAZ COLVIN

STOP THE RACIST ATTACKS AGAINST DETROIT YOUTH

---

*No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were: any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.*

—from *Meditation XVII*,  
by John Donne

## IN DEFENSE OF DETROIT

As the result of a long series of hostile takeovers, business schemes for privatization, the crisis of growing poverty, and decades of near-apartheid racial segregation, much of the Detroit school system has been transformed into a wasteland of abandoned buildings and cheap charter schools. With each new wave of “innovation” and “reform,” more schools close down and more programs disappear. In their place, a regime of escalating tyranny and oppression has risen. Student rights have been replaced by boot camp-style discipline and uniforms. Critical thinking and creativity have been replaced by rote memorization and scripted test preparation. Teachers, counselors, and support staff have been replaced by security guards and police. More than ever before, the Detroit school system operates on the basis of a giant, racist stereotype against black and other minority youth, imposing a regime of blame and persecution against the students who have been the most victimized.

In seeking to end this cycle of victimization, BAMN has taken up the defense of students who have become targets of attack. One of those students is Arnaz Colvin, a Cody D.I.T. student who was brutalized by police—and then falsely charged with a felony to justify the police misconduct. BAMN's legal case to defend Arnaz Colvin represents a

Come to the next court hearing at  
Frank Murphy Hall of Justice:  
**Wed., July 9 @ 9:00am**

Contact a BAMN organizer to get a  
parental permission form and to  
arrange transportation.

Liana:(313)806-1485 Maria:(313)980-7075

defense of *all* Detroit students—a defense of all students' right to a decent education, a defense of all students who are struggling against a system that specializes in sending black and Latino youth to prison instead of college, and a defense of the dignity and humanity of a city that has been so badly mistreated for so long. The outcome of the Arnaz case will be a test of the power of the prolonged, racist assault against Detroit youth, versus the power of a new, youth-led movement demanding real hope for the future. The case to defend Arnaz is therefore a case about *your* rights, *your* education, and *your* future. And the struggle surrounding this case has already produced results that affect thousands of people, well beyond the courtroom walls.

## THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE ARNAZ CASE

It is no accident that a case of this nature stems from Cody High School. Cody students are among the most mistreated students in the district, live in some of the most impoverished and crime-ridden neighborhoods in the city, and seldom feel safe anywhere—least of all when the police are present. The school and the police act as a single institution: they treat all Cody students like criminals, creating an atmosphere of perpetual friction and hostility. That hybrid institution is the source of a constant and capricious bombardment of disciplinary measures against the whole student body; on any given school day, any student may face suspension for any reason—and harassment for no reason at all. The gang activity, which is cited as

justification for the police reign of terror, merely operates as a tool at the disposal of the police. The DPD officers are the preeminent thugs in the neighborhood—they have, in reality, very little competition in that regard.

Only one week before the brutal beating and arrest of Arnaz Colvin, hundreds of Detroit students—Cody D.I.T. students in greater numbers than any other Detroit school—returned from a BAMN-organized march in Washington, D.C. to demand increased college opportunities for minority youth. The march coincided with the Supreme Court case, *Schuetz v. BAMN*, a case to restore affirmative action programs and to defend minority political rights. The city-leading turnout of Cody students in that march gave proof that the students' determination to succeed and to thrive had not been crushed by the terrible conditions of the school; instead, the students who faced the worst conditions stepped forward to provide the best leadership for social progress. It was a cruel irony that the students returned home only to receive a reminder of the vast distance between their dreams and their reality.

On October 23, 2013, police responded to reports of a fight after school at the bus stop on W. Chicago and Faust. No fewer than five squad cars arrived at the scene, and the group of fighting students quickly disengaged and ran from the area, while the rest of the students remained to wait for the bus. That *should have been* the end of that unfortunate episode. But the police would not be satisfied until they had made things much worse. The police began harassing the remaining students, ordering everyone to leave the bus stop, and one officer in particular, Jason Tonti, decided that he was going to flex his muscle. Tonti, a white officer with a history of violence, singled out Arnaz Colvin, grabbed him by the arm, threw Arnaz face-down onto the nearby con-

crete step, beat Arnaz in the head repeatedly, and slammed his knee into Arnaz's lower back, fracturing a vertebra. During his sick indulgence in racist brutality, Tonti spewed out a venomous stream of insults and expletives—including the N-word—while the other officers hungrily probed for any signs that one of the shocked, onlooking students might get angry enough to be incited to a confrontation. An officer threw one student against the hood of a squad car, shouting, "You got a problem with what you just saw?" and then shoved the student to the ground. Tonti put Arnaz in the back of his car and left the scene. But Jason Tonti still was not satisfied.

Instead of driving Arnaz directly to the police station, Tonti took Arnaz on a sadistic, hour-long detour. Tonti drove to Rouge Park, where another white officer—off-duty and in plain clothes—came to meet him. There by the Rouge River, isolated from the view of Cody students and cell phone cameras, Tonti held a gun to Arnaz's head, threatening to kill him and to throw his dead body down into the river. Finally satisfied that he had inflicted psychological damage that would last long after the physical injuries had healed, Tonti drove Arnaz to the police station. None of the officers there questioned Tonti why he had taken an hour to deliver his prisoner, and Tonti did not even report the use of violent force until his commanding officer later discovered it and instructed Tonti to cover his tracks properly. Arnaz was held in jail for three days, in severe pain and fearing for his life, without any access to medical treatment or legal counsel, while the police refused even to disclose his location to his mother and sister. The dream that students had marched for just a week earlier—to gain college opportunities and a better life—now seemed remote: Arnaz was living in a nightmare.

#### **BREAKTHROUGHS IN THE ENSUING STRUGGLE**

Just a short time ago, if someone had predicted that the public exposure of the scandal of the Arnaz case would lead to a multi-million dollar philanthropic effort to renovate Cody High School and the surrounding neigh-

borhood, no one would have believed it. But such a project now exists. For some of the students who have engaged in the struggle to defend Arnaz, their hope was simply to save one fellow student from a terrible fate. That result alone would justify a tremendous exertion, and the achievement of that goal will *require* such an exertion. But it was never completely clear what sort of ramifications might unfold for so many others, how the conditions of the school might change depending on the general course and outcome of the struggle, or how the conditions of the city might change. Previously, rumors had circulated among students that Cody High School might be shut down—a few students sardonically greeted the notion that their brutal overlords might thereby cease to torture them. The real lesson, however, is this: during the course of a powerful and determined struggle, the students have the potential to become the true lords of the situation. *That* potential is the best and most realistic basis for hope in the city of Detroit.

For the police, the prosecutors, and the judges in the criminal justice system in Detroit, the most shocking feature of BAMN's defense of Arnaz Colvin has been the persistent presence of high school students at each of the court hearings. No protest and no political action has aroused as much clamor and consternation as the simple, civic participation of sitting quietly in the courtroom audience to listen to the proceedings. For the students, the experience has been profoundly educational. In addition to witnessing first-hand the real machinations of the legal system, students have gained new insights as thinkers and leaders through the comprehension of the strategic aims of each of the conflicting sides. Following the court hearings, students have attended post-meetings to review the proceedings, where the legal analysis has been provided by the lead attorney for Arnaz's defense, Shanta Driver, the same attorney who argued before the U.S. Supreme Court in *Schuette v. BAMN* and serves as BAMN's national chairperson.

Why is this simple activity—students attending a court hearing—so controversial? In part, the legal system

fears real public scrutiny. The actual proceedings in a Detroit courtroom have almost nothing in common with the countless, ridiculous court dramas on television. The Detroit criminal justice system functions more like a meat factory: they grind the accused into submission, package them in prison uniforms, and ship them to the incarceration industry with the mechanical monotony of any factory assembly line. The standard routine is *guilty, guilty, guilty*. But under the critical eye of the Detroit students attending the Arnaz hearings, that routine has been thoroughly disturbed. At certain points, the prosecutors appeared completely dumbfounded, as though they had forgotten how to argue a case after years of idly engaging in a mindless rubber-stamping process. Jason Tonti improvised and lied and changed his story on the stand under questioning, as though he could read in the eyes of the students, "Do you really think you can get away with a story like that? We know what really happened." And after each display of consternation in the courtroom, after each barrage of threats and intimidation at school to discourage students from attending the hearings, some students have learned the most important secret that the system has to hide: *if all of these authorities are so terrified of us, then we must have more power than we realized.*

The same process of awakening occurred in the marches and demonstrations through the neighborhood around Cody High School. As a place that has long felt unsafe for students, including the landmark of the infamous "murder Mac," the many abandoned houses, and the roving stray dogs—the entire community has lived in fear of itself. Many people said that a march would be too dangerous. Few students had the courage to attempt it. But when those students began marching anyway, the community rejoiced. Fear and submission diminished, pride and solidarity cheered from the houses and rang from the car horns, and confidence grew with each advancing step. These are some of the lessons of the case to defend Arnaz Colvin. Join the struggle and learn for yourself.

2014-06-06, 2014-06-09