Justice in Alabama

Dieser Vorschlag bezieht sich auf Robert Mulligan (1962): To Kill a Mockingbird (Verfilmung des gleichnamigen Werks von Harper Lee).

Aufgaben

Der vorliegende Vorschlag enthält in Aufgabe 3 alternative Arbeitsanweisungen.

1 Outline Judge Key's reasons for calling Bryan Stevenson and the lawyer's responses to that call. (Material)

(30 BE)

2 Compare the legal case in the excerpt (Material) to the legal case in the film "To Kill a Mockingbird".

(30 BE)

3 Choose one of the following tasks:

3.1 In 1993, Walter McMillian was acquitted and released from prison after spending six years on death row. In his memoir, Bryan Stevenson noted that "[i]t was far too easy to convict this wrongly accused man for murder and send him to death row for something he didn't do and much too hard to win his freedom after proving his innocence. We have serious problems and important work that must be done".

Taking the quote and the events in the excerpt (Material) as a starting point, assess to what extent work has been done to lessen institutional racism in the USA since the time of the events in the McMillian case.

or

3.2 You are studying film at a university in the USA. After having watched "To Kill a Mockingbird" in your class, you discussed how the film can influence social attitudes. Your professor has asked you to share your views with a wider university audience.

Write a blog entry for the film studies department's website in which you discuss whether films like "To Kill a Mockingbird" can help change racist attitudes today.

(40 BE)

Material

Bryan Stevenson: Just Mercy (memoir, 2014)

In his memoir, Bryan Stevenson, a young African American lawyer, writes about his work trying to free unjustly accused prisoners awaiting execution in Alabama in the late 1980s. In this excerpt, he converses with the judge who imposed the death penalty in a case in which his client, a black man named Walter McMillian, had been convicted for murdering a young white woman.

[…] I picked up the line.
"Hello, this is Bryan Stevenson. May I help you?"
"Bryan, this is Robert E. Lee Key. Why in the hell would you want to represent someone like Walter McMillian? Do you know he's reputed to be one of the biggest drug dealers in all of South Alabama? I got your notice entering an appearance[1], but you don't want anything to do with this case."

"Sir?"

"This is Judge Key, and you don't want to have anything to do with this McMillian case. No one really understands how depraved this situation truly is, including me, but I know it's ugly. These men might even be Dixie Mafia[2]."

The lecturing tone and bewildering phrases from a judge I'd never met left me completely confused. "*Dixie Mafia*"? I'd met Walter McMillian two weeks earlier, after spending a day on death row to begin work on five capital cases[3]. I hadn't reviewed the trial transcript yet, but I did remember that the judge's last name was Key. No one had told me the Robert E. Lee[4] part. I struggled for an image of "Dixie Mafia" that would fit Walter McMillian.

"'Dixie Mafia'?"

"Yes, and there's no telling what else. Now, son, I'm just not going to appoint some out-of-state lawyer who's not a member of the Alabama bar[5] to take on one of these death penalty cases, so you just go ahead and withdraw."

"I'm a member of the Alabama bar."

I lived in Atlanta, Georgia, but I had been admitted to the Alabama bar a year earlier after working on some cases in Alabama concerning jail and prison conditions.

"Well, I'm now sitting in Mobile. I'm not up in Monroeville anymore. If we have a hearing on your motion[6], you're going to have to come all the way from Atlanta to Mobile. I'm not going to accommodate you no kind of way."

"I understand, sir. I can come to Mobile, if necessary."

"Well, I'm also not going to appoint you because I don't think he's indigent[7]. He's reported to have money buried all over Monroe County."

---

[1] appearance – *here*: a formal legal notice to inform the judge that Stevenson will be legally representing the accused man
[2] Dixie Mafia – a criminal gang in the southern United States
[3] capital cases – cases involving the death penalty
[4] Robert E. Lee – the name of the famous general that led the army of the Southern States in the American Civil War
[5] Alabama bar – organization of lawyers certified to take on cases in the state of Alabama
[6] motion – formal legal request involving the case being discussed
[7] indigent – very poor (In cases in which defendants are too poor to afford a lawyer, the judge can appoint a lawyer to represent them.)

"Judge, I'm not seeking appointment. I've told Mr. McMillian that we would –" The dial tone interrupted my first affirmative statement of the phone call. I spent several minutes thinking we'd been accidentally disconnected before finally realizing that a judge had just hung up on me.

I was in my late twenties and about to start my fourth year at the SPDC[8] when I met Walter McMillian. His case was one of the flood of cases I'd found myself frantically working on after learning of a growing crisis in Alabama. The state had nearly a hundred people on death row as well as the fastest-growing condemned population in the country, but it also had no public defender system, which meant that large numbers of death row prisoners had no legal representation of any kind. My friend Eva Ansley ran an Alabama prison project, which tracked cases and matched lawyers with the condemned men. In 1988, we discovered an opportunity to get federal funding to create a legal center that could represent people on death row. The plan was to use that funding to start a new nonprofit. We hoped to open it in Tuscaloosa and begin working on cases in the next year. I'd already worked on lots of death penalty cases in several Southern states, sometimes winning a stay of execution just minutes before an electrocution was scheduled. […]

When I'd visited death row a few weeks before that call from Robert E. Lee Key, I met with five desperate condemned men: Willie Tabb, Vernon Madison, Jesse Morrison, Harry Nicks, and Walter McMillian. It was an exhausting, emotionally taxing day, and the cases and clients had merged together in my mind on the long drive back to Atlanta. But I remembered Walter. He was at least fifteen years older than me, not particularly well educated, and he hailed from a small rural community. The memorable thing about him was how insistent he was that he'd been wrongly convicted.

"Mr. Bryan, I know it may not matter to you, but it's important to me that you know that I'm innocent and didn't do what they said I did, not no kinda way[9]," he told me in the meeting room. His voice was level but laced with emotion. I nodded to him. I had learned to accept what clients tell me until the facts suggest something else. […]

(748 Wörter)

Bryan Stevenson: Just Mercy, New York 2014, S. 20–22.

Hinweis
The McMillian case took place in Monroeville, Alabama, the hometown of Harper Lee, which was the inspiration for the setting of the events in her novel "To Kill a Mockingbird".

[8] SPDC – Southern Prisoners Defense Committee, an Atlanta-based organization providing legal help to prisoners in southern states in order to fight racial and prison injustice
[9] not no kinda way – not in any way