



Sybrina Fulton, mother of Trayvon Martin, sits with her attorney, Benjamin Crump, in 2013.

Joe Burbank/Reuters

The Advocate

When black families are torn apart by violence, their first call often goes to Benjamin Crump.

A conversation with the civil rights defender who has become the “black family emergency plan.”

by DA'SHAWN MOSLEY



“You kill a dog, you go to jail. You kill a little black boy, and nothing happens.”

—Benjamin Crump

IF I WERE MURDERED TODAY—say, shot and killed while walking unarmed through a residential area, wearing my hoodie—and my murderer weren’t arrested by dawn, my family would make one phone call. To Benjamin Crump.

This has become the African-American family emergency plan—set in motion when the “hurricane” is a white person with a gun. Call Benjamin Crump.

This is what Trayvon Martin’s family did in 2012 when they realized the criminal justice system would not punish the man who killed Trayvon. They called the lawyer who once stood on the steps of a courthouse where two white men had just been acquitted of beating to death a 14-year-old boy and said: “You kill a dog, you go to jail. You kill a little black boy, and nothing happens.” They called the attorney who, time and time again, tries to make something happen. They called Benjamin Crump.

In Trayvon’s case, Crump, one of the best-known civil rights attorneys practicing today, thought at first that something would happen without his help—since the only thing Martin had in his possession when George Zimmerman shot and killed him was a can of fruit juice and a bag of Skittles. When Crump realized there was a strong possibility that justice would not be served, he came face-to-face with what he calls “a test from God.”

“Nobody was watching this call between me and this brokenhearted father, save God,” Crump told *Sojourners* in a phone interview in October. “And I believe God was testing me to see if I was going to answer the bell, use the blessings and education and all the other things [God] has given me to be a blessing to the least of these. I stepped out on faith to do the right thing. And God took over from there.”

Michael B. Thomas/AFP

Above, Benjamin Crump comments on the preliminary autopsy report of Michael Brown, slain in Ferguson, Mo., in 2014. At right, Sequita Thompson stands with Crump as she talks about the fatal police shooting of her grandson Stephon Clark in Sacramento, Calif., in 2018.

‘We help David fight Goliath and win’

It wasn’t a surprise to learn that Crump is a believer. For years, he has seemed to possess strength that could only come from above. How else could he be so stoic during televised press conferences for his clients, men and women weeping and grieving for their sons and daughters? Crump has stood alongside Tracy Martin, Sybrina Fulton, and many other parents of slain black people, and in their moments of sadness he has found a way to be an unwavering stone of support for them.

Faith is more than a thread through Crump’s life: It is his life’s scaffolding. Crump grew up in the Pentecostal church and said that, throughout his life, his grandmother “held onto the unchanging Word of God.” To this day, Crump considers her the wisest person he has ever met, and the effect her faith had on him and his own belief is evident. The motto of Parks and Crump, the law firm he and his friend Daryl Parks founded and amicably ended more than 20 years later, was: “We help David fight Goliath and win.”

Crump often uses biblical parables in his closing arguments, and he attends Bethel Missionary Baptist Church in Tallahassee, Fla., where he serves on the board of trustees. He is also a member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, whose first president was Martin Luther King Jr.

“I constantly recite the psalms,” said Crump. “Doing civil rights work, my colleagues and I go into daunting and dangerous situations and receive death threats. But I constantly go back to the Bible and focus on the fact that ‘Yea, though I walk through the shadow of death, I should fear no evil, for thou art with me.’”

In the courtroom, he says, he thinks not only about those he represents but also about the well-being of his adversaries, including the people accused of doing bodily harm to the loved ones of his clients. He says he’s just trying to live out the words of 1 Peter 4:8: “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.”

“You have to have no ill will in your heart against your opponent,” said Crump. “In fact, you have to pray for them as well. I go into the courtroom reciting scripture

and believing it with my heart. It has allowed me to be successful and allowed God’s will to be done.”

A passion for the future

Throughout Crump’s career, he has had many legal victories, including the conviction of former Oklahoma City police officer Daniel Holtzclaw, who was sentenced to 263 years in prison for 18 counts of sexual assault against eight different women. But Crump has also had many losses, among them the acquittal of Zimmerman, the man who shot and killed Trayvon Martin almost seven years ago.

In such grand situations of failure and injustice, how does faith remain strong? Doesn’t the belief that good will prevail crack under that pressure?

“I grew up in the government housing projects,” he said, “in a very small, conserva-

Much about African-American life has changed since then, Crump says, and yet much remains the same.

“I pray that God will continue to help us produce strong children,” said Crump, “who will be able to overcome whatever may come and challenge all this racism and oppression that tries to treat certain children of God as inferior and not deserving of equal justice and equal opportunity to the American dream.” A father of one, and parental guardian to two cousins he adopted, Crump cares a great deal about the future of children in this country, and his passion to shape the nation for their betterment fuels his work.

What God expects Christians to do

Since the aftermath of Martin’s death, when Crump met with Gov. Rick Scott of Florida to argue why Zimmerman deserved to



Rich Pedroncelli/AP

tive town: Lumberton, N.C. I saw pain and suffering from an early age. I knew that was part of life, that it’s not always going to be easy. But with God’s help, we can overcome many situations.” He says that while times are tough today for African Americans, he remembers when things were worse. He was born in 1969, only a year after King was shot. At the time of his birth, the nation was still struggling to shape itself in accord with the Civil Rights Act of 1964; many if not most schools were still segregated.

be convicted of murder, Crump has been involved in the intersection of social justice and high-level politics. That involvement has escalated in recent years. Since Trump was inaugurated, Crump has become a powerful critic of the self-proclaimed nationalist, writing searing op-eds for HuffPost and elsewhere about the president’s racist and xenophobic statements and policies.

“Today, I can declare without pause that President Donald Trump has now firmly established himself as the most racist

Attorney Benjamin Crump discusses the results of a forensic examination on Emantic Bradford Jr., who was fatally shot by police in Birmingham, Ala., on Thanksgiving Day in 2018. Crump represents Bradford's family.

president this great nation has ever seen,” Crump wrote after Trump told the press that “very fine people” could be found among the white nationalists of the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Va., in August 2017, which resulted in the death of Heather Heyer and injury to dozens of others.

When Crump is asked what he would say to Christians who continue to support Trump, despite the president’s hateful rhetoric and actions, Crump alludes to King’s statement in the “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” And then he talks about the death of Botham Jean, whose family is among Crump’s list of clients.

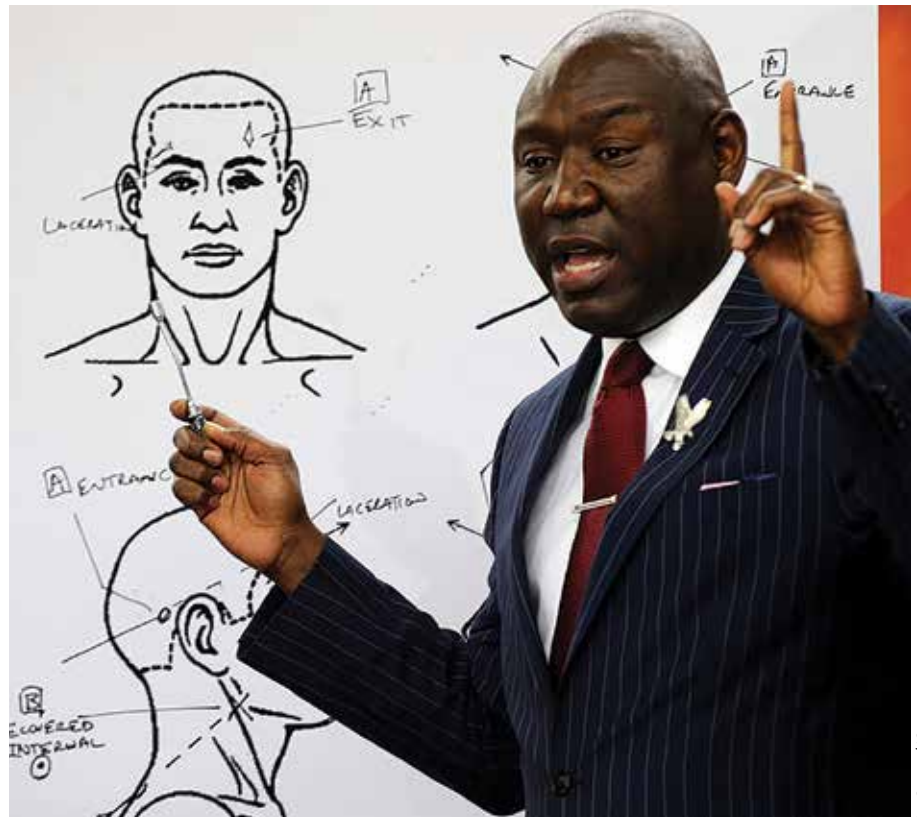
On the night of Sept. 6, 2018, Dallas police officer Amber Guyger, a white woman, arrived at the apartment door of her neighbor, Botham Jean, a 26-year-old African-American man. Guyger entered Jean’s apartment—alleging that she thought she was at her own door and claiming that she thought he was a thief in her home—and she shot and killed him. Since then, many questions have been raised about her story; in late November, a grand jury indicted her for murder, only the second Dallas police officer charged with murder, according to the *Dallas Morning News*, in the last 45 years.

“Botham Jean was an outstanding young man,” said Crump. “College educated, never committed a crime in his life, finished at the top of his class, was a certified public accountant working for PricewaterhouseCoopers, was a devout Christian, went to church on a regular basis, and sang in the gospel choir. ‘Botham Jean’ should be on our tongues when we talk about justice and what God expects us Christians to do.”

The black life insurance policy

Crump believes the same can be said for victims of LGBTQ hate crimes. That’s why, even though he works closely with many black Protestants—more than 40 percent of whom oppose same-sex marriage—he has joined the board of the National Black Justice Coalition, an organization that aims to empower the African-American LGBTQ population.

“Discrimination is wrong on any level,” said Crump. “God put us all on this Earth and wants us to try to find [God’s] grace and purpose in our relationship with



[God]. We cannot condemn our brothers and sisters. Whatever institutional justice we have needs to be fair on every level.”

To be a black person in this country and talk to Crump seems a bit like talking to one’s life insurance policy. Yet, somehow, chatting with him makes me feel deeply hopeful. He gives the impression that he cares about my well-being, my whole self, and he has oriented his life toward holding the American legal system accountable for my safety—even though we’ve never met. It’s a divinely inspired act to extend love to someone you don’t know and defend them as fiercely as you would defend yourself.

“Even though those white jurors in that Oklahoma courtroom probably didn’t have any of the life experiences that those poor black women had,” said Crump about the trial of Holtzclaw, “they had a sense of fairness and ethics, humanity and justice. They returned with a verdict to say that we, as a society, are better than this.”

Crump is convinced that such results help victims have faith that the justice system can be made to work for them.

“That was a case that really made me believe that God will move mountains. I tell everybody, including the young lawyers who I’ve tried to inspire: ‘You just fight to do the right thing. God will take over from there.’ ■

Da’Shawn Mosley is assistant editor of Sojourners magazine.

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