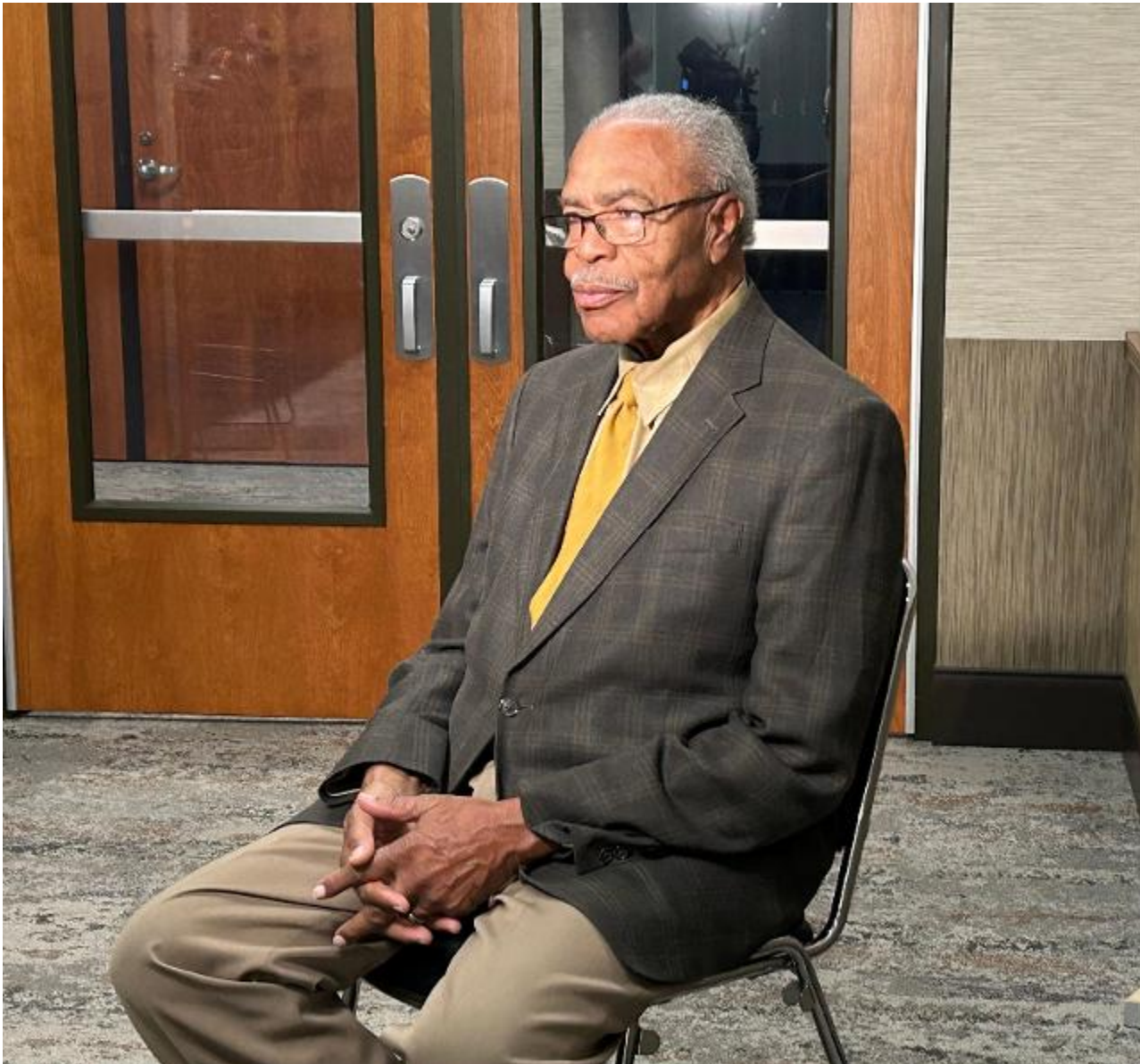


"The Wheels of Justice Grind": Last Living Eyewitness to Emmett Till's Abduction Speaks at SIU Event

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter
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COLLINSVILLE - “My story is not a pleasant story. It’s not a pretty story. But it’s an American story.”

So began Rev. Wheeler Parker, Jr.’s keynote speech at the [Illinois Higher Education Equity Symposium](#) on Thursday, Oct. 19, 2023. Parker spoke to Southern Illinois University students and faculty about his experience growing up in the Jim Crow-era South and how he has learned to live after witnessing the abduction of Emmett Till, his best friend and cousin. Parker is the last living eyewitness to the kidnapping before Till was tortured and lynched in 1955.

Wheeler’s keynote address kicked off the two-day symposium, which aims to facilitate conversation about diversity, equity and inclusion in all schools in the Southern Illinois University system. The SIUE Gospel Choir performed before Parker took the stage to share his story and speak about his book, “A Few Days Full of Trouble: Revelations on the Journey to Justice for My Cousin and Best Friend, Emmett Till,” published in January 2023.

“In the South, we were trained early on how to behave, how to stay alive,” Parker shared in his speech. “You’ve got to do everything right... You could be killed for anything.”

This is what Parker, then 16, tried to explain to his younger cousin during the summer Till spent visiting Mississippi from Chicago. Till became a major figure in the Civil Rights Movement, but he was only 14 on the day he stopped by Carolyn Bryant’s grocery store with Parker and a few friends. Parker remembers the fear that gripped him when Till whistled at 21-year-old Bryant.

“If you didn’t live in the South, you had no idea what it was like,” Parker said. “1955 in Mississippi and you wolf-whistle a white woman? That’s death.”

The teenagers fled. Back home, Parker, Till and their family waited, terrified, to see if there would be consequences. When Parker heard voices outside their house at 2:30 a.m. a few days later, he said, “I think, ‘God, we are going to die.’”

Bryant told her husband Roy and his half-brother J.W. Milam that Till had verbally harassed and grabbed her. That night — Aug. 28, 1955 — the men kidnapped, tortured, mutilated and lynched the 14-year-old.

Parker remembers all of this, including the crushing certainty that nothing would happen to the men who killed his best friend. Till's body was discovered in the river a few days later. His mother, Mamie Till-Bradley, demanded an open casket, and the photos of Till's brutalized body sparked outrage.

Enough outrage, in fact, that the killers went to trial. This was "history," Parker said; at the time, no white people were prosecuted for murdering Black people. State police had to monitor the prosecuting attorney's home after he received death threats for taking the case. In the end, the all-white jury deliberated for barely an hour before acquitting Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam.

The men confessed to the murder in a magazine interview not long after. Carolyn Bryant died in April 2023, after admitting that she had fabricated the story about Till harassing and touching her. Sixty-seven years later, it still upsets Parker to remember how so many people justified Till's murder because of what Bryant said he had done.

"They demonized that boy. I suffer from that now," Parker said. "Emmett's mother thought she'd be killed every day she went into the courthouse."

But despite — or maybe because of — his pain, Parker preaches forgiveness. He told SIU students and faculty that he has decided to live his life with purpose instead of hatred. He does have "some satisfaction" in knowing that people reap what they sow, but he has chosen trust in God rather than anger.

"We have no animosity or ill will toward . You can't do that, not if you're a Christian," he said. "People want me to hate. When you hate, you suffer. I can't afford the luxury of hate."



Though Till became known in death, Parker remembers him as he was alive: a fun-loving prankster who would beg his older cousins to tell him jokes; a kid who, a few hours before he was killed, cried when his uncle accidentally hit a dog with the car.

The Civil Rights Movement was fueled by Till's murder and his mother's decision to keep his casket open. Still, it wasn't until March 2022 that the Emmett Till Antilynching Act made lynching a federal hate crime.

Parker was in the Oval Office when President Joe Biden signed the act into law. He remembers standing next to Michelle Duster, the great-granddaughter of [NAACP](#) founder Ida B. Wells, as Duster noted that her grandmother had stood in the same spot lobbying for an antilynching law 100 years earlier. It was a bittersweet victory.

"The wheels of justice grind, but they grind slow," Parker said more than once during his keynote address. "He didn't die in vain. At least, I hope he didn't die in vain. There were a lot of things that came about because of him. He still speaks from the grave. Only thing I think about is how he suffered."