



# In The Struggle

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## Ypsilanti Family Settles Lawsuit with Washtenaw County: Legal Triumph Following Family Tragedy

By Kathryn Bruner James  
Goodman & Hurwitz, P.C.

In the fall of 2009, Bruce Lee and his mother, Beatrice McKeown, settled their claims against Washtenaw County and several Sheriff's Deputies, stemming from the vicious and racist beatings of Bruce and his brother Clifton ("Pete"), who died from asphyxiation from the assault, in June 2006. Although Bruce survived, he was arrested, held for several days without ever being charged with a crime, and missed his own brother's funeral.

The in-car videotapes, along with other dramatic evidence obtained through discovery, exposed the pervasive culture of racism and violence within the Washtenaw County Sheriff's Department.

### The June 1, 2006 Incident:

In the early morning hours of June 1, 2006, Bruce Lee witnessed two Washtenaw County Sheriff's Deputies, Chris Campbell and Aaron Hendricks, pull his nephew over as both men were driving home in separate cars from celebrating their friend's graduation from the University of Michigan. The stop occurred just around the corner of Bruce's home in the West Willow neighborhood of Ypsilanti.

Bruce continued home and woke up his brother, Pete, and they walked to the scene of the stop to check on their nephew, who by now was handcuffed and placed in the back of the squad car for no reason. As soon as the brothers asked, "Are you O.K.?", Deputy

Campbell started screaming at them to "keep walking," and Deputy Aaron Hendricks radioed for "backup." Campbell continued yelling, "you need to go," to which Bruce replied, "I'm leaving." Campbell, who had a history and reputation within the Sheriff's Department for unprovoked violence and a racist attitude, jumped Bruce from behind as he was walking away.

Once Bruce was on the ground, Campbell pinned him down, struck him and pepper sprayed him twice in the face at point blank range, and then cuffed him behind his back. When Bruce attempted to reason with the Deputies, he was ordered to "get up, mother f--ker," to which he explained, "I can't see." Campbell threatened, "This is how the summer's gonna be, man. Get used to it." The officers threw Bruce into the backseat of another squad car that had arrived on the scene.

Meanwhile, Pete questioned the Deputies why his brother was being

abused, to which Hendricks responded by screaming at Pete to "back away." Twice Pete asked, "Why are you jumping my brother?" and "Why don't you let my brother go?" He finally said, in frustration, this is my "mother-f--king neighborhood" – i.e. who are you to come in here and treat us like this?

After exchanging words with Deputy Hendricks about what was in his pocket (a cell phone), Pete walked back toward his home, as ordered. Hendricks followed Pete around the corner. As soon as more backup arrived, Hendricks ordered Pete to the ground, which he obeyed, but Hendricks jumped him anyway, initiating a violent assault involving several officers that resulted in Pete's death. The in-car video footage graphically shows at least eight officers climb on top of Pete and pin him to the ground, taunting him to

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# Ypsilanti Family Settles Lawsuit

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“come on and talk all that sh-t now.” When Pete called the officers who were beating him “mother f--kers,” Deputy Joseph Eberle (who several months before kicked a handcuffed African American kid in the head) struck Pete in the head at least three times, hard and with a closed fist, and also kneed him in the head several times.

Eberle then put his pepper spray canister within a few centimeters of Pete’s face. Pete’s agonized screams and pleas can be heard on the audio as Eberle is killing him, “I can’t breathe” and “Give me air.” Instead of allowing Pete to breathe, they all leaned in harder on him. Eventually, Pete lost, and never regained, consciousness.

As they rolled him over on his back, Deputy Hendricks threatened and screamed at him, “*You wanted to be here so bad, man, you get to join him. Welcome to your neighborhood! (We’ll) be out here all summer long, okay.*” Eberle then kicked Pete in the head and dragged his limp body along the ground, while other officers accused him of faking, refusing to breathe and “*working on his federal lawsuit.*” At one point a voice can be heard on the audio saying, “Turn him around and monitor him,” to which Eberle responds, “F--k him.” Eberle bends over Pete’s limp body, apparently checking for signs of life, and says, “He’s moving. He’s fine.” But he wasn’t.

Meanwhile, while these events were occurring outside, Pete’s and Bruce’s mother, Beatrice McKeown, was awakened by a family friend who told her that her sons were being beaten and/or killed. She went outside to find her sons. When she approached the scene, she could see Pete lying motionless on the ground. She was immediately stopped by a Deputy, who, even after she told him that she was Pete’s mother, would not permit her to go to her dying son.

She watched, helplessly as he was loaded into the ambulance. During this process, she heard him emit an audible groan. That was the last time she saw her son before learning that he had indeed died.

Meanwhile, as Pete was being beaten and killed, Bruce was sitting in a patrol car around

the corner, handcuffed, with pepper spray in his eyes and mouth, knowing he had done nothing wrong. He began to get

increasingly frustrated, until he eventually blew up verbally, out of sheer frustration, and started yelling expletives, and complaining that he was being arrested for no reason. He also had been spitting out the window of the squad car because his mouth was full of toxic chemicals from the pepper spray, when a Sergeant on the scene can be heard to say, “Did he just spit on you?” Bruce, still handcuffed behind his back, was then immediately pulled out of the car, by at least 3-4 of the officers, thrown to the ground head first, kicked in the head (twice), verbally taunted and called a “mother f--ker,” pepper sprayed in the face again (at point-blank range), punched several times in the head with a closed fist, hog-tied, kicked again in the head after he was hog-tied, and then thrown, like a trussed pig, back into the back seat of the patrol car. During this beating, an officer can be seen planting drugs on the floor of the car from which Bruce had been pulled.

Eventually, Bruce was taken to the Washtenaw County Jail where an intake officer refused to book him due to his obvious wounds and directed deputies to take him to the hospital. Bruce was treated and returned to the Jail where he was held for 5 days without being charged or arraigned (despite the fact that the deputies had earlier set him up for drug charges). He was not even informed of his brother’s death until he was finally allowed to make his first phone call to his sister, who informed him that Pete had died.

## History of Violence and Racism in the Washtenaw County Sheriff’s Department:

The Washtenaw County Sheriff’s Department has a bad reputation, even within their own ranks. According to Deputy Eric Kelly, who pled guilty to federal criminal civil rights violations for his participation in hogtying and beating Bruce Lee, the night shift had a slogan: “*Why does County wear brown? Because blood shows up on blue.*”

Chris Campbell, the deputy who initiated the whole confrontation by jumping Bruce Lee from behind, had a long history of misconduct within the department, including well known incidents of excessive force (losing his job twice for this reason), stalking, and repulsive displays of racism, including explicitly racist emails depicting African Americans as illiterate drug dealing black savages.

Just hours before the June 1, 2006 incident he widely circulated the following email to dozens of deputies:

“**MIRANDA RIGHTS (REVISED)** - YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO SWING FIRST. HOWEVER, IF YOU CHOOSE TO SWING FIRST, ANY MOVE YOU MAKE CAN, AND WILL, BE USED AS AN EXCUSE TO BEAT THE SHIT OUT OF YOU. YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO HAVE A DOCTOR AND A PRIEST PRESENT. IF YOU CANNOT AFFORD A DOCTOR, OR IF YOU ARE NOT PRESENTLY ATTENDING A CHURCH OF YOUR CHOICE, ONE WILL BE APPOINTED FOR YOU. DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT I HAVE TOLD YOU ASSHOLE?”

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### Federal Criminal Charges Against Three Deputies Involved in the Incident:

An internal investigation commenced almost immediately following the incident, which very quickly led to an investigation by the Michigan State Police, and eventually the FBI and the Attorney General’s office, resulting in criminal indictments for civil rights violations (excessive force) against three Deputies: Eberle, Hoy, and Kelly. Kelly pled guilty to the charges and was sentenced to one year of nonreporting probation and a \$100 special assessment, all other fines were waived. Following an incomplete presentation of evidence, an overtly racist defense, and a trial conducted by Judge Sean Cox, who was clearly biased in favor of the officers, an all white jury acquitted Eberle and Hoy.

### Settlement and Moving Forward:

Bruce Lee and Beatrice McKeown both filed federal civil rights lawsuits. The suits included counts of false arrest, excessive force, due process violations, and racially motivated conspiracy to commit constitutional violations (for Bruce), interference with a familial relationship (for Beatrice), and intentional infliction of emotional distress and municipal liability (for both). Both cases settled in late 2009, for a non-disclosed monetary amount and additional terms.

The Lee family has committed to working with Ron Scott and the Detroit Coalition Against Police Brutality to create a mechanism for citizen oversight of law enforcement abuse in their community. In the meantime, the family is using some of their money to open a restaurant, a venture to help them heal from this tragic event and build a legacy for their children.

Now, there’s a new Sheriff in town, literally. Because of the widespread publicity generated by these vicious beatings and other problems with the Department, Sheriff Dan Minzey lost the 2008 election to Jerry Clayton, the first African American Sheriff in Washtenaw County. His administration has reportedly spent great efforts cleaning up a variety of problems that were left by former Sheriff Minzey. This case and cases like it play an important role in publicly exposing the unconstitutional, racially motivated and violent policies and practices in our law enforcement agencies. We are proud to have played a part in making an inroad – albeit a very small one – toward the dismantling of the culture of police violence and racism in our communities.

## NLG Detroit & Michigan **Sustainers**

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