

NY vigil marks 20 years since Yusuf Hawkins murder

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SUZANNE MA

Associated Press Writer

NEW YORK (AP) – In 1989, after a white mob attacked and killed a black teenager in Brooklyn, the Rev. Al Sharpton led black demonstrators down streets where angry whites confronted them, yelling obscenities and throwing bricks and watermelons their way.

On Sunday, exactly twenty years later, Sharpton joined the slain teenager's family and friends at the Brooklyn cemetery where Yusuf Hawkins is now buried.

Sharpton led the procession of about 40 people, on a gently winding dirt road, past hundreds of crypts and tomb stones until they arrived at Hawkins' grave, under the shade of a tall tree.

"People talk about the civil movement in the South but there was a significant movement in the North," Sharpton said on Sunday. "It started in 1989 with Yusuf Hawkins."

Hawkins was just 16 years old when he was shot twice in the chest on Aug. 23, 1989 in the mostly white Brooklyn neighborhood of Bensonhurst. He and three black friends were there to look at a used car that was for sale. About 30 whites, armed with at least one gun, bats and golf clubs, chased the four and surrounded them.

Sharpton thanked supporters for their bravery and strength through the years, but said that the fight against violence and racism is far from over.

"We kept marching, we took the bruises," said Sharpton, who in 1991 was stabbed in the chest with a steak knife as he prepared for a march to recall the Hawkins killing. "But we've got to keep it going. We want Yusuf to know that we didn't forget."

In front of Hawkins' tomb stone, those in the procession bowed their heads as Sharpton said a prayer. Then, many closed their eyes and quietly sang "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," a hymn that's often called America's black national anthem.

While it was empowering to keep her son's memory alive, Diane Hawkins said it is disheartening to see violence and racism persist in America today.

"Every day I hear on the news about young men, police officers under cover being shot down," she said, referring to an incident in New York in late May when a white officer shot and killed a black off-duty officer he mistook for a criminal. "That's not good. It's not right."

Sharpton acknowledged African American milestones in the last 20 years, including the election of New York's first and only black mayor, David Dinkins, shortly after the Hawkins killing, as well as the achievements of New York Gov. David Paterson and U.S. President Barack Obama.

"So much has changed but much has stayed the same," Sharpton said. Still, "the case of Yusuf Hawkins showed us that we can win."

Eight people were tried for the attack; five were convicted but only three were sentenced to prison time. Attention centered on Joseph Fama, then 18, and Keith Mondello, then 19, who were said to have been the leaders of the mob.

Mondello was released in 1998 after spending eight years in prison. Upon his release, he met with Hawkins' father, the late Moses Stewart, and also sent a three-page letter to the family asking for forgiveness. Fama, the gunman, remains jailed, convicted of second-degree murder. He is not scheduled for parole until 2022.