



# Aftermath Of Equality *Southern Rites* depicts a town in transition

By Eliza Berman

THE FIRST TIME PHOTOGRAPHER GILLIAN LAUB traveled to Mount Vernon, Ga., in the fall of 2002, it was to document Montgomery County High School's homecoming celebration. Set off by a local student's letter to *Spin* magazine, Laub found a tradition long divided along racial lines. The school offered two ballots: one for a white homecoming queen and one for her black counterpart.

Seven years later, Laub returned to photograph another red-letter day in the lives of the town's teenagers: their high school prom. But in Mount Vernon, 2½ hours southeast of Atlanta, the date of the big dance depended on the color of one's skin. The white prom took place one night, and the black prom the next.

Laub's photographs of the dual proms ran in national magazines, inciting outrage at this vestigial segregation that had somehow survived a decade into the 21st century. The stories embarrassed Mount Vernon, and that shame led to change: homecoming was integrated in 2006, and prom in 2010.

When Laub returned yet again, it was to document the school's first integrated prom. This time she brought a video camera, and she kept returning for the next three years. The story that unfolded—of what happens in the aftermath of belated integration—is the subject of Laub's new documentary, *Southern Rites*, which debuts May 18 on HBO.

**Change agent** "They would still be having segregated proms if she didn't write that letter," Laub says of Anna Rich, here with her husband and children, who wrote to *Spin* magazine in 2000 about Mount Vernon's proms

Photographs by Gillian Laub

For Laub, a 40-year-old New Yorker, Mount Vernon's story wasn't over just because black and white students now dance together in tuxedos and gowns one night a year. "They integrate these proms, and then what?" she tells TIME. "What's really going on in this community? I was on a mission to figure out what that was."

Laub says many of Mount Vernon's residents had no interest in helping facilitate her mission. Although she had received permission from a committee of parents to photograph the integrated prom, she was escorted off the premises by a police officer shortly after arriving. On another visit, the tires of her rental car were slashed. In the most jarring display of resistance to her presence in the town, the then Montgomery County sheriff confiscated her camera and pulled her screaming from her car for photographing a parade, she recounts. Laub managed to include footage of the assault in her film by popping out the memory card as he tore the camera from her hands.

Efforts to run Laub out of town only strengthened her resolve to stay. But the story Laub expected to find, of a latter-day Little Rock where integration paved the way for social change, wasn't the one she wound up telling. On Jan. 29, 2011, less than a year after the prom was integrated, a 62-year-old white man named Norman Neesmith shot and killed Justin Patterson, a 22-year-old black man, in Neesmith's home. When Laub next returned to Mount Vernon, she found the community rent by yet another incident of racial strife.

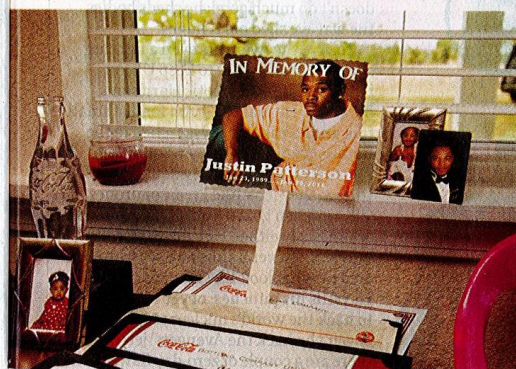
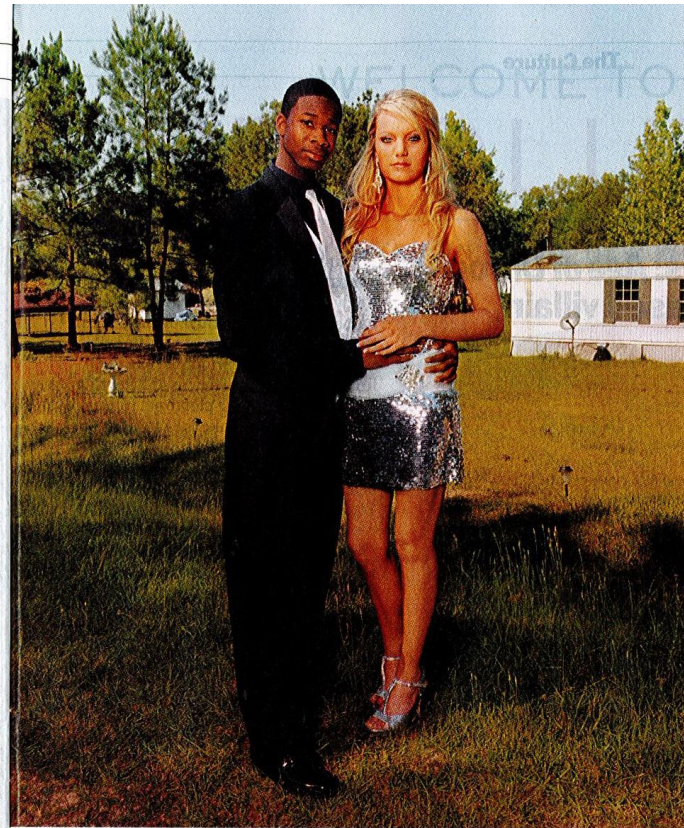
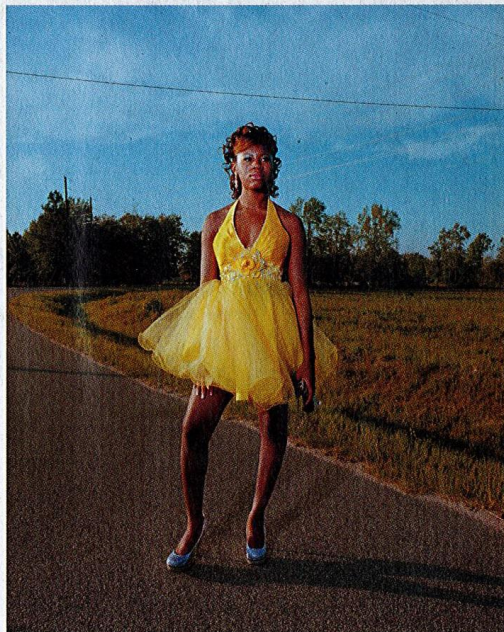
#### A Legend Steps In

AN UNFLINCHING FILM ABOUT SUCH polarizing events might not ordinarily appeal to television producers, but it was right up the alley of R&B singer John Legend, who co-wrote the Oscar-winning song "Glory" for Ava DuVernay's civil rights film *Selma*. When he heard about Laub's project, he and his partners at Get Lifted Film Co. signed on. He was sold because Patterson's death in some ways presaged the killings of many young black men in the years that followed. "Someone died, and there was a court case that tested the value of black lives," Legend tells TIME. Patterson's parents had to ask whether, in Legend's words, "the family of a young black male being shot will get justice for their son." It's the same question that followed the deaths



**Family ties** "Daddy's family really didn't want to have anything to do with him because I'm biracial," Danielle says of Neesmith. "For anyone to think he killed Justin because he was black is just stupid."

**Next steps** A student named Keyontae poses for Laub on the day of the prom in 2011. It was the second year that prom in Mount Vernon was integrated



**Pioneers** "Everybody should be together. We all go to the school together, we grew up together," says Brooke Beecher. She and Qu'an Peoples were the first interracial couple to go to the integrated prom

**Loving tribute** A memorial to Justin Patterson in his father's Mount Vernon home. At bottom left is a photo of his daughter Meiah

of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown and Tamir Rice.

On the night of the shooting, which took place in a town neighboring Mount Vernon, Patterson and his younger brother Sha'von went to Neesmith's home for a late-night tryst with the man's biracial great-niece Danielle, then 18, who considered herself Neesmith's daughter. They were joined by a 14-year-old friend of Danielle's, who had told the brothers she was older. When Neesmith heard voices, he woke up and grabbed the .22-caliber pistol he kept beside his bed. He found the young people paired off in separate rooms: one couple was smoking marijuana, the other was having sex. There was a scuffle as the brothers tried to flee, and Neesmith fired four shots. One hit Justin Patterson, who died in Neesmith's yard.

Neesmith called 911 to report that he had shot someone. When the dispatcher asked who, he replied, according to a recording of the call, "It was just a black boy." He was charged with seven counts, including felony murder. The district attorney told Patterson's family he had enough to send Neesmith away for life, but on April 26, 2012, Neesmith accepted a plea bargain for reduced charges, which required him to serve 365 days in a detention center. The sentence was a blow to Patterson's family and much of the community, who likened it to getting away with murder. But Neesmith, cut off by his own family for raising a biracial child, says that the shooting had nothing to do with race.

*Southern Rites* was supposed to be a portrait of a town in transition told through the story of its teenagers. Instead, it morphed into a complex story of justice in a town where it wasn't surprising when a black man running for sheriff received death threats, and where mixed-race couples are only just beginning to walk down the street without fear of contempt. "The proms were just a symptom of something larger," Laub says.

Over the closing credits of *Southern Rites*, Legend sings "We Still Believe," a song he wrote for the film. Although its message is one of hope—"We see the future/ We hold the key"—his optimism is restrained. "I think we still have a long way to go before black lives really matter in the way that they're supposed to," he says. "We can get better by exposing these things and trying to shine a light on them, but we still have a long way to go."