

# The Miami Times

## The McDuffie Riots

Could it happen again?

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Don L. Horn listened keenly as the verdict was announced for the officers accused of killing Arthur McDuffie and tampering with evidence. Not guilty on all charges.

“Noooooooooooooooooooo,” said Horn, then a first-year law student at the University of Miami. “Not even tampering with evidence? They admitted to falsifying the police report. How could they not find them guilty of falsifying the report?”

Horn, who lived in Overtown, said he got word that “stuff had already” started in Liberty City and someone was already dead.

“I hope these N—ers go off tonight,” Horn remembers saying at the time.

So frustrated was he by the verdict that he joined a sea of people moving through Northwest 62nd Street and 14th Avenue. When it got too violent Horn left the streets.

That was May 17, 1980, almost 36 years ago and the start of what would be known throughout history as the McDuffie Riots. The riots went on for three days, spilling death and destruction along the way. When it ended, 18 were dead including children, 350 were injured and left the community with an economic blow of \$100 million in today’s dollars.

Horn and nine other panelists last Thursday shared their thoughts and experiences related to that tumultuous time in Miami’s history during a discussion called “McDuffie Riots 35 Years Later: Its Legacy and Societal and Legal Impacts.”

The riots happened almost 36 years ago, but the planning of the program started before the 35th anniversary and organizer attorney **Joseph R. Serota** said he didn’t want to change the name.

Serota, who is founder of **Weiss Serota Helfman Cole & Bierman**, was living in Miami when the riots happened, “so I lived through it,” he said. But he became deeply interested when he came upon a report about the riots for then-State Attorney Janet Reno while sorting through Irwin Block’s papers after his death in 2015. With the response to police violence in Ferguson, Missouri and Baltimore, Maryland, Serota knew he wanted to take a historical view of riots as well as the current state of community relationships with police.

McDuffie was a Black 33-year-old insurance agent and former U.S. Marine. On Sunday, Dec. 17, 1979, the father of two was heading north on North Miami Avenue at about 1 a.m. He caught the attention of a white Dade County Public safety police officer, Ira Diggs. Panelist Marvin Dunn said McDuffie “popped a wheelie, gave the officer the finger and took off.” Diggs pursued McDuffie. According to Dunn’s book, “The Miami Riot of 1980: Crossing the Bounds,” “McDuffie was soon being chased by more than a dozen police cars in a chase that lasted eight minutes and at some points exceed 100 miles an hour. He [McDuffie] finally stopped at the corner of North Miami Avenue and 38th Street as police units swarmed in.”

Three minutes later, McDuffie’s head had split open from a beating “by no fewer than six officers.” Four days after that he died.

There was a cover-up about the beating, which was staged to look like an accident. Officer Charles Veverka confessed about the cover-up. By Dec. 28, 1979, officers Alex Marrero, Ira Diggs, Michael Watts and William Hanlon were charged with manslaughter and evidence tampering.

By January, the Black community was stirred and began protests calling for “Justice for McDuffie.” With the case garnering national attention, the trial was moved to Tampa. An all-white jury acquitted the four officers. Miami erupted.

“If the jury was half Black and half white would there have been a riot?” Dunn asked the room at HistoryMiami museum last week. “It was the most difficult thing I have seen in 75 years. It was worse than the 1926 hurricane. The hurricane damaged property. This damaged souls.”

The panelists addressed whether a major riot could happen again in Miami-Dade. Alison Smith, who is a deputy city attorney for Miramar, said community policing has changed for the better and people now get to interact with the police. She spoke of programs like Coffee with a Cop and a Citizens Academy, whose aims are “to break down barriers and build bridges” between police and residents.

Panelist Horacio S. Aguirre, chair of the Miami Civilian Investigative Panel, a group that monitors police complaints by residents, said he wasn’t surprised the riot happened in Miami.

“It didn’t surprise me what happened,” Aguirre said. “What did surprise me is that it didn’t happen before and that it hasn’t happened again. Leadership is still very ignorant that this can happen again today.”

Aguirre said while the panel can investigate complaints about Miami officers, his budget for the countywide program has not been funded.

Serota said Miami-Dade endured a true test when a neighborhood watchman killed Miami Gardens teen Trayvon Martin. George Zimmerman was not held legally responsible for the teenager’s death.

“There were demonstrations but there was no violence,” Serota said. “It is less likely to happen again because of the complexion of the police force.”

He drew a comparison to Ferguson and how that majority Black community was served by a majority white police force. In 2014, reports show that Ferguson had 50 white and three Black police officers. That department has just hired a Black police chief, Delrish Moss, former city of Miami’s commander, community relations section, and public information officer.

Dunn believes Miami’s culture has changed with the influx of Black immigrants so another riot is less likely to happen. That and the fact that lawyers cannot use preemptory challenges to skew the racial makeup of juries.

Caribbean Blacks, like Haitians and Jamaicans, do not bring the same “racial baggage,” said Dunn.

