



CALIFORNIA

The radical L.A. student newspaper that inspired a generation of activists



Gary Tyler, who spent 41 years in a Louisiana prison, hugs friend Tekla Miller during a reunion in Santa Monica with members of a University High School student newspaper that took up his cause in the 1970s. (Wally Skalij / Los Angeles Times)

BY DOUG SMITH | SENIOR WRITER

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At 17, he was locked up in Louisiana’s infamous Angola state prison, the youngest person in America on death row.

She was 14, a student at a Detroit high school, searching for her place in the world.

“As young people, something’s going to get you,” she said, looking back over so many decades. “Something’s going to catch you. What’s going to hold your passion?”

For her it was a headline on a tabloid newspaper being hawked outside her school by a long-haired radical from Los Angeles: “SAVE GARY’S LIFE!”

The message hit Arnita Dobbins so hard she joined the longhair’s campaign on behalf of an inmate more than 1,000 miles away. For the next few years, she remained a staffer on [the counterculture publication, the Red Tide](#), founded on a high school in West Los Angeles.

Gary Tyler lived — by the merest chance — and eventually landed a job as a youth outreach worker in Venice, just a few miles away from that high school.

For Dobbins, Tyler became a touchstone, the cause that taught her how “changing the world makes your life better.”

Forty-seven years after that vicarious connection, Dobbins met Tyler face to face for the first time last month. Their meeting in Los Angeles was nominally a celebration of Tyler’s 65th birthday. More broadly, it commemorated a decades-long saga that spanned the nation but improbably traces its origins to a group of politically precocious students at University High School, or UniHi, as it’s known.



Arnita Dobbins speaks during a reunion and fundraiser for Gary Tyler at a gathering in Santa Monica on July 16, 2023.
(Courtesy Rosanna Hill
)

Their radical newspaper — taking on causes from the Vietnam War to Indian-themed school mascots — not surprisingly displeased the principal.

The Oct. 1, 1971, [premiere issue](#) now seems quaint: a fusion of teenage rebellion and the counterculture rhetoric of the 1970s.

“It came--flooding the schools, crushing everything that stood in its way, leaving in its wake a trail of destruction, havoc, rebellion,” the young publishers wrote.

“Administrators reeled, choking on its noxious reek, as it tore their offices asunder. Cut slips, tardy slips, suspension notices, bad conduct notices, report cards--all were swept away in its churning mist. It was...the RED TIDE.”



Red Tide member Michael Letwin, left, marches with Gary Tyler's brother Terry, third from left. Michael's brother David, center, holding pole, traveled to Detroit for the protest. (Courtesy of the Red Tide)

As chronicled by a [then-cub reporter for The Times](#) — me — the newspaper was banned on campus and two students were suspended for selling the tabloid for 10 cents.

But the administration had overreached. Initially winning district approval to distribute, but not sell, the newspaper on campus, the students objected to the requirement to submit each issue for the principal's approval. One of the students, Michael Letwin, was the son of noted civil rights lawyer [Leon Letwin](#). Working with the American Civil Liberties Union, the elder Letwin filed a lawsuit. In 1976, he won a more expansive right when the California Supreme Court ruled unconstitutional a principal's prohibition of the paper based on objections to an article.

CALIFORNIA

Clash as UniHi raises student rights issues

Aug. 15, 2023

By then the younger Letwin had graduated from UniHi and pursued his radical leanings as an organizer for the [International Socialists](#). When the organization moved its Los Angeles office to Detroit, Letwin followed, introducing his publication into a milieu he described as the “heart of Black working-class America.” Like many American cities, Detroit was caught up in the nation's tense and sometimes violent reckoning with school segregation.

The case of Gary Tyler was swirling in the leftist and Black circles of Detroit.

Tyler, 16 at the time, was in a cohort of Black students desegregating Destrehan High School in a New Orleans suburb. On the day that changed his life, Oct. 7, 1974, the principal ordered school closed early and Black students were sent home on a bus after racial tension erupted into fights.



Red Tider Michael Letwin, fourth from left top row, in 1976 with Detroit members of the radical newspaper and student movement protesting the death sentence of Gary Tyler. (Courtesy of the Red Tide)

A crowd of white students surrounded and began jostling the bus and pelting it with stones and other objects. A shot was fired. One white student was hit and another grazed. Later, 13-year-old Timothy Weber died.

Sheriff's deputies rushed into the bus, and Tyler complained about their gruff handling of students. Officers arrested him for disorderly conduct and took him to the sheriff's station, where he was accused of being the shooter but refused to confess. Under interrogation, four other students on the bus implicated him. He was tried as an adult, and in November 1975 was convicted of capital murder by an all-white jury. Under Louisiana law, the conviction carried a mandatory death sentence.

His execution was scheduled for May 1, 1976.

Letwin dedicated the April/May issue of the Red Tide to Tyler.

Under the headline "SAVE GARY'S LIFE!" subheads screamed, "FRAMED," "ALL WHITE JURY" and "THE KLAN STEPS IN." The story made the case that a rigged judicial system was intent on killing Tyler to satisfy a racist community's demand for retribution.

The

RED TIDE

No. 26 April/May 1976 A Revolutionary Paper For Young People 10c

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SAVE GARY'S LIFE!

By Red Walker and Frank Runninghorse

Gary Tyler is a 17-year-old black man sentenced to death for the murder of a 13-year-old white youth in Louisiana. Gary is to be electrocuted on May 5—unless we stop it.

FRAMED

From the very beginning of the case, it has been a big frame-up. The main witness that testified against him later said that she lied.

She now claims that she was assaulted by the deputies and that she and her mother were intimidated into signing a false statement which they had not read. They were held under police guard until the trial.

THE GUN

The gun that was supposed to have been used in the killing was a .45 automatic, which had no finger prints on it. The lead slug that supposedly came from that gun showed no trace of having passed through a human body.

This gun turns out to have been "stolen" from an indoor firing range used largely by "law enforcement officers." The gun was never reported stolen until it came up in this case.

The autopsy report, which was

not even read to the jury, provides no evidence as to the caliber of the bullet, or the angle at which it struck the victim. Gary's gloves showed no trace of nitrates, which is the test used to find exploded gunpowder.

HOW THEY FOUND IT

The gun was "found" only after the pigs had searched the bus from top to bottom twice and found nothing. Then the bus was taken to the police station after a tip by an "informer" who said that Gary had cut the seat and hid the gun in it.

We are asked to believe that the pigs somehow missed noticing the eight inch slit and bulges in the seat in the first two searches. Gary had no knife with which to cut this seat in the first place.

HOW IT STARTED

The violence started when a group of white students were throwing bricks and bottles at the bus of black kids. Someone shot a gun, and a 14 year old white student fell dead. Then the pigs came and started dragging people off the bus with guns held on them.

They were forced to lie on the ground. The deputy pig that was investigating the case was the cousin of the dead boy. He immediately started taking kids off the station insisting that they saw

what happened. After beating a few kids, the pig started beating Gary, asking him, "Nigger, who killed my cousin?" Gary kept telling him over and over he did not do it.

ALL WHITE JURY

In a small town in Louisiana where everybody knows each other, it's hard to get a fair trial if you are black, especially if the jury is all white.

THE KLAN STEPS IN

Since the day of the shooting, the Klan has tried to make this case part of the anti-busing movement. David Duke, a national leader of the KKK, flew in from Boston to agitate for local racists and cops to convict Gary and increase racist activity against black people.

JUSTICE MEANS: JUST US RICH WHITE RACISTS

The Gary Tyler case has proven once again that blacks, working class and young people can expect no justice from this stinking system. Gary, Hurricane Carter and others will only receive justice when we the oppressed masses of working class people rise up and throw off our chains. It's up to us now.

DON'T LET THEM MURDER GARY—DEMONSTRATE!

Gary has only a few weeks to live. People across the U.S. must run a major campaign to save him from racist "justice."



WHAT YOU CAN DO

Only pressure from us can save Gary, Hurricane and others. Police and courts can only be counted on to do more of the same racist shit.

The Red Tide calls on all our readers and supporters to join with us in this all-out effort. A brother's life is at stake here.

We are organizing a petition drive in the high schools and calling a demonstration on May 1st in downtown Detroit to demand Gary's freedom.

You can help by passing out petitions and leaflets in your school and workplace, and by joining the "Save Gary Tyler Committee." Get in touch with the Red Tide. For further information, phone 313-869-8656 today.

GARY MUST GO FREE!
SEE AD ON PAGE 12 FOR GARY TYLER DEMO IN DETROIT ON MAY 1. DO YOUR SHARE TO SAVE GARY.

FIGHT RACISM



A 1976 front page of the Red Tide advocating for Gary Tyler, who was on death row at the time. (Courtesy of the Red Tide)

“DON’T LET THEM MURDER GARY—DEMONSTRATE!” it ended.

That summer, Letwin and his visiting brother David, who was still a student, marched in protest in Detroit and helped organize a rally with civil rights icon Rosa Parks that gained national attention.

The outcry in Detroit had no actual bearing on Tyler’s survival. His attorney had made multiple mistakes, starting with his failure to seek a change of venue, but a new lawyer obtained a stay on appeal.

In July 1976, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in another case that Louisiana’s mandatory death sentence law was unconstitutional. Tyler’s sentence was reduced to life without the possibility of parole for 20 years.

Those 20 years came and went, but parole did not. Instead, his case fell into legal and political sinkholes. Under byzantine Louisiana law, he could not be paroled unless sentenced to a fixed number of years.

In 1980, his lawyers won a ruling in the U.S. 5th Circuit Court of Appeals that Tyler's trial was "fundamentally unfair" due to prejudicial jury instructions. The court ordered a new trial but, on appeal, reversed the order on a technicality when Tyler's original attorney could not recall why he failed to object to the instructions — thus failing to provide proof that his silence was not a strategy.



Gary Tyler spends a moment of reflection in his studio where he makes quilts at the Brewery Artist Lofts in Los Angeles. "I tell people, you enjoy your life. Now I'm trying to enjoy mine," he said. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

But a mounting body of evidence reported by Amnesty International, [New York Times op-ed columnist Bob Herbert](#) and [others](#) has since weighed decidedly in favor of Tyler's claim of innocence. According to those accounts, no gun was found on the bus, and the bus driver said he thought the shot came from outside.

A gun was produced for trial, but it was later found to have been stolen from a shooting range used by sheriff's deputies, and then it disappeared from evidence. The four witnesses who testified against Tyler later recanted, saying they had been coerced by police.

In the first of three requests, the Louisiana Board of Pardons in 1989 narrowly voted in Tyler's favor. But Gov. Charles "Buddy" Roemer, facing a reelection challenge from a field including David Duke, a onetime grand wizard of the KKK, declined.

Just before leaving office, the defeated Roemer rejected the second request. [In a 1994 review of the case](#), Amnesty International concluded that its racial and political context qualified Tyler as a "political prisoner." The argument did not move Roemer's successor, Edwin Edwards, who denied Tyler's third request for clemency.

A revival of interest in the case leading to Herbert's columns in 2007 raised hope that Gov. Kathleen Blanco would grant a pardon. She did not.

Column One

A showcase for compelling storytelling from the
Los Angeles Times.

[More stories](#)

Tyler's path to freedom finally came indirectly with a 2012 Supreme Court ruling in an Alabama case, applied retroactively, that life sentences without the possibility of parole for juveniles were unconstitutional. Still, it took four more years before the St. Charles Parish district attorney offered a hard bargain. He would vacate the murder conviction if Tyler pleaded guilty to manslaughter. Tyler agreed.

On April 29, 2016, he was released on time served, remarkably neither a broken nor a bitter man.

He chose to put his four decades of incarceration behind him, discussing his past only if pressed. Even then, he might suggest looking him up on Google.

“Basically, my position is that I am no different from the next person,” he said in a recent interview. He doesn't dwell on his misfortune. “I'm just focusing on the future.”

At Angola, formally the [Louisiana State Penitentiary](#), Tyler had laid the foundation for a new life, evolving inside an institution once reputed America's most notorious prison that was itself evolving to reflect changing mores of the world outside.



The Louisiana State Penitentiary, also known as Angola after the former plantation that occupied the territory, which was named for the African country that was the origin of many enslaved Africans brought to Louisiana. (Giles Clarke / Getty Images)

Transferred into the general population after more than nine years in 23-hour-a-day lockdown, Tyler would, over the decades, complete his high school education, lead the drama club and volunteer in the prison hospice. The hospice work taught volunteers and other prisoners the value of caring and compassion.

“It has a way to rewind the hardwire,” he said of hospice work. “Once you feel as though, ‘Oh, man, I can’t see myself doing that. I wouldn’t be able to take care of another man, having to feed, having to bathe, having to wipe another man’s butt.’ But when they see people who do it, they take their hat off to them and say, ‘Man, what you’re doing is a noble thing, even though I can’t do it.’ ”



Over the decades in prison, Gary Tyler completed his high school education, led the drama club and volunteered in the prison hospice. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

He also discovered his calling when he and the other volunteers took up quilting to raise funds for visiting family members of the terminally ill. They sold their quilts [to the public at the annual rodeo](#) on the prison grounds. Out of respect for their dedication to the dying, the other hardened lifers gave them space to pursue the traditionally women's craft.

Tyler himself was a reluctant convert until he saw others using cloth to form imagery.

“Wow, just this is very powerful. So I decided to OK, I'm gonna start doing this. And I realized that I had a craft. And that craft was that I was a graphic artist.”



CALIFORNIA

The untold story of the Zoot Suit riots: How Black L.A. defended Mexican Americans

June 2, 2023

Tyler was allowed to take his acting troupe outside prison grounds for community events where he became known to the religious community.

Encouraged by an assistant warden and religious leaders, Tyler reluctantly took on what became his tour de force. In 2012 he directed a cast of 70, including inmates from the nearby Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women, in a three-day run of “The Life of Jesus Christ.” The 3½-hour play, performed on the rodeo grounds,

gained [media coverage](#) and its production was depicted in a documentary film, “Cast the First Stone.”



A poster for the documentary “Cast the First Stone,” with a painting of its star, Gary Tyler, stands beside a rack of quilting material in Tyler’s downtown studio. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

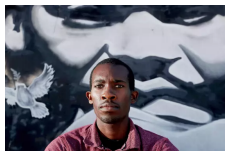
Tyler had become a paragon of redemption from a crime that, by almost universal assent, he did not commit.

After his release, many forces pulled him to Los Angeles. As an adolescent he had lived briefly with an older sister in Watts.

And at Angola, he acquired patrons in L.A.

[Bob Zaugh](#), a longtime member of the anti-Vietnam War [Peace Press](#), which printed the first issue of the Red Tide, had visited Tyler in 1989 and promised him a job upon his expected release. When that did not happen, Zaugh stayed in touch for the next 26 years.

A more recent visitor was Steve White, a onetime leftist organizer who had retired as [vice president of Glendale College](#). White promised Tyler a room in his Pasadena home when he got out. That promise turned into an eight-month stay, during which White schooled the then-57-year-old in the essentials that could not be learned in prison — driving, cooking for himself and budgeting his money.



CALIFORNIA

A Black LAPD officer wanted to make a difference. Then, he says, he was racially profiled by his own department

July 5, 2023

And Zaugh came through. He introduced Tyler to Alison Hurst, founder of Safe Place for Youth, the Venice social services agency commonly known as SPY. Tyler's mentoring of younger prisoners at Angola, following his own mentorship by his

elders, had prepared him to be an outreach worker, a job he has held for more than seven years, commuting from his home in Pasadena.

Zaugh and others pulled some strings to secure a studio in the downtown Brewery Artist Lofts, allowing Tyler to resume his passion for quilting. He recently had his [premiere exhibiting his post-prison work](#) at Detroit's Library Street Collective.



A quilted self-portrait of Gary Tyler as a young man in prison awaits shipment to New York for display in the Armory Show. Tyler first took up quilting as a volunteer in Louisiana's Angola state prison hospice program. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

An impresario of leftist causes, Zaugh regaled Tyler with all that the Red Tide had done for him and invited him to a Zoom celebration of the publication's 50th anniversary in 2021. That gathering inspired him to organize the two-day reunion that doubled as a fundraiser for Tyler's retirement. With a work history of only seven years, he will receive modest Social Security benefits if he works three more years to qualify.

The finale of the weekend event, in the Santa Monica backyard of prolific progressive [fundraiser Jan Goodman](#), had a '70s counterculture flair. Most of those attending were contemporaries of Tyler or older. Joe Chambers of Chambers Brothers fame brought the Ash Grove Alumni to play two sets, ending with the classic "Time Has Come Today." Mike Farrell of TV's "M*A*S*H" delivered a speech on his view of the moral depravity of the death penalty.

Franky Carrillo, who spent 20 years in prison before his [murder conviction was overturned](#) and now sits on L.A. County's Probation Oversight Commission, introduced Tyler.

CALIFORNIA

Finally, a Tide of Victory

Sept. 17, 1997

As the cub reporter who had chronicled the Red Tide's legal triumphs, it was a reunion for me too.

Back in the 1970s, I wrote several articles on the Red Tide's legal wrangling with the Los Angeles Unified School District, the last one describing a stalemate with the principal over an invitation to controversial anti-war activist Jane Fonda to speak on campus.

ARCHIVES

From the archives: Lack of policy bars Jane Fonda talk at Unih

Aug. 15, 2023

I had not followed their transition to Detroit and campaign to free Tyler. But with the reunion coming up, Karen Pomer, one of the original Red Tiders, emailed me. Even though I had transferred to another beat and did not cover their legal victory or Fonda's speech — under Times style of the day, she was called “Miss Fonda” — Pomer said the Red Tiders always thought of me as part of their origin story. Would I like to come? Of course I would!

Seeing Letwin and Pomer for the first time since I had told their story more than 50 years ago, I was gratified to find the adults I had championed as teenagers still loyal to their ideals.

Letwin, after 37 years in the New York public defender's office, is retired in Brooklyn. He's abandoned the riotous hair but stays active in Black and Palestinian causes. While in college, Pomer helped make a documentary on the 1978 battle between Philadelphia police and the communal organization MOVE, and later worked on the independent news broadcast Democracy Now.

Inspired by the [renewed coverage](#) in 2006, Letwin and several other Red Tiders took up Tyler's case again, Pomer said, and she co-produced an episode on Tyler for [Democracy Now](#).

At the reunion, they reminisced over mementos — posters of Red Tide issues, photos of the June 13 march in Detroit and a group shot of raised-fist revolutionaries. T-shirts emblazoned with the SAVE GARY'S LIFE! front page were snatched up at \$20 apiece.



Gary Tyler and a friend look over mementos from the 1970s. (Wally Skalij / Los Angeles Times)

At its deepest level, the celebration was not so much of Tyler but of the lives he changed from his lockup in the darkest days of his life.

“When I saw the headline, ‘SAVE GARY’S LIFE!’ it just reached out and grabbed me,” said Kyle “Hoppy” Hopkins, who stood at a microphone leaning on a cane. “What is

this? This is 1976. This cannot be happening. When I saw this I said, ‘This is my time. I got to do something.’ I knew I had to do something about Gary’s situation.”

Hopkins joined the Red Tide, which by then had evolved into a youth movement as well as a publication. Into the early 1980s he continued to put out the paper, writing the stories and laying out the pages while traveling to demonstrations — as he put it, making the news and writing the news.

“I went around this country chanting, ‘Gary Tyler is you, Gary Tyler is me,’ ” he said.



WORLD & NATION

A Black woman and a white woman went viral fighting racism. Then they stopped speaking to each other

May 17, 2023

Dobbins, the girl from Detroit, also had ended up in California. After traveling from her home in Antioch on the Sacramento River Delta, she told me she owed her success as a businesswoman to the skills she learned putting out the Red Tide. Today she’s a managing partner of a company that assists the deaf.

“I stayed till the end,” she said. “It just kind of disbanded. People aged out. People were growing up. We weren’t in high school. Just the times were changing too.”

It was Tyler's story, at her most vulnerable moment, that headed her on a lifetime path of political activism, and possibly saved her life, she said.



Gary Tyler gets a pat from a well-wisher. He doesn't dwell on his misfortune: "I'm just focusing on the future." (Wally Skaliy / Los Angeles Times)

"Even to this day, the work that we did around freeing him still affects how I live my life," she said. "So whether he saved my life, I don't know. I just know thank God it

took that turn.”

When it was Tyler’s turn to speak, he succinctly summed up the wonder of his life.

“I didn’t set out to be who I am today,” he said. “But sometimes your course of destiny is set for you, in which case with me I had no control over it.”

And yet, “I saved someone’s life when people were fighting to save my life,” he said. “That says a lot.”



Doug Smith

Los Angeles Times senior writer Doug Smith scouts Los Angeles for the ragged edges where public policy meets real people, combining data analysis and gumshoe reporting to tell L.A. stories through his 50 years of experience covering the city.