

Jury selection begins in trial against Charlottesville racists

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A photo of Heather Heyer, who was killed during a white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017, sits on the ground at a memorial [File: Evan Vucci/AP Photo]

Charlottesville, October 26 (RHC)-- Marcus Martin and his then-finance, now-wife Mirza Blair were walking with a jubilant crowd of counter protesters in Charlottesville, Virginia, when neo-Nazi James Alex Fields rammed into the crowd with his car.

Martin pushed Blair out of the way, probably saving her life. He was struck and thrown in the air over the car, breaking his leg. Their friend, Heather Heyer, was killed. The car's driver, Fields, an admirer of Adolf Hitler, is serving a life-sentence in prison.

Martin is now one of nine plaintiffs in a U.S. civil trial that opened on Monday seeking damages against the white supremacist organisers of the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville on August 11-12, 2017.

Jury selection in the lawsuit filed four years ago by civil rights lawyers based in New York and funded by a non-profit group. U.S. District Judge Norman Moon has scheduled a month for the court proceedings.

Former President Donald Trump had notoriously sought to wave-off the Charlottesville attacks at a news conference by saying, "you also had people that were very fine people, on both sides."

Neo-Nazis and white supremacists had gathered in Charlottesville to protest the city's planned removal of a large bronze statue of the top Confederate commander Robert E Lee. The incident sparked a wave of racial protests in the U.S. and attacks on Confederate monuments.

The suit was filed under an 1871 federal law known as the "Klu Klux Klan Act" passed by Congress after the U.S. Civil War to provide legal avenues to address organised violence against Blacks by white gangs in the South.

The Klu Klux Klan is a white supremacist hate group that targeted Blacks, Jews and other minorities beginning in the wake of the U.S. Civil War, in which forces of southern states had fought to preserve slavery.

It seeks damages against rally organiser Jason Kessler and Richard Spencer, who coined the term "alt-Right", and other defendants including leaders of prominent white supremacist groups whose members attended the rally; Vanguard America, the Traditionalist Worker Party, the League of the South, the Nationalist Front and Knights of the Klu Klux Klan.

"The evidence in our case makes crystal clear that this violence, the violence that took place over August 11 and 12th, 2017 was not an accident," said Amy Spitalnick, executive director of Integrity First for America, a non-profit group formed to fund the lawsuit.

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