

# The black teenager who saved a racist



**In 1996, a black teenager protected a white man from an angry mob who thought he supported the racist Ku Klux Klan. It was an act of extraordinary courage and kindness - and is still inspiring people today.**

Keshia Thomas was 18 when the Ku Klux Klan, the white racist organisation, held a rally in her home town in Michigan. Hundreds of people gathered to show them they were not welcome.

The atmosphere was tense. Police dressed in riot gear and armed with tear gas protected a small group of Klansmen. Thomas was with a group of anti-KKK demonstrators on the other side of a fence.

Then a woman with a megaphone shouted, "There's a Klansman in the crowd."

They turned around to see a white, middle-aged man wearing a KKK flag and T-shirt, symbols of hatred and racism. He had a Nazi SS tattoo on his arm. He tried to walk away from them, but the protesters, including Thomas, followed, "just to chase him out".



There were shouts of "Kill the Nazi" and the man began to run - but he was knocked to the ground. A group surrounded him, kicking him and hitting him with the wooden sticks of their placards.

So Keshia, then still at high school, threw herself on top of a man she did not know and shielded him from the blows.

For Mark Brunner, a student photographer who witnessed the episode, it was who she saved that made Thomas' actions so remarkable.

"She put herself at physical risk to protect someone who, in my opinion, would not have done the same for her," he says. "Who does that in this world?"

So what made Keshia Thomas help a man whose views were so different from her own?

"I knew what it was like to be hurt," she says. "The many times that that happened, I wish someone would have stood up for me."

Thomas has never heard from the man she saved, but she did once meet a member of his family. Months later, someone came up to her in a coffee shop and said thanks. "What for?" she asked. "That was my dad," the young man replied.

For Thomas, the fact that the man had a son gave her actions even greater significance - she had potentially prevented further violence.

"For the most part, people who hurt... they come from hurt. It is a cycle. Let's say they had killed him or hurt him really bad. How does the son feel? Does he carry on the violence?"



Keshia Thomas (left) pictured before the rally with friends