

# [From Fighting for Injustice to Death Row](#)

[SUBSCRIBE NOW](#) [LOG IN](#)

## *From Fighting Injustice to Facing Death Row: The Bizarre Case of Pastor Glasgow*

Image



Pastor Kenneth Glasgow at his home in Dothan, Ala. “I don’t do violence,” he said. “To know that I’m the cause, or involved in, a black woman’s death? It’s like the death of me, really.” Credit Audra Melton for The New York Times

By **Shaila Dewan**

▪ July 7, 2018

DOTHAN, Ala. — A Google search will show that Pastor Kenneth Glasgow first made news in 2001 as the former crack addict and prison inmate who was [fretted over](#) by his older half brother, the Rev. Al Sharpton Jr.

The local media in Dothan, a small, unprepossessing city in Alabama’s Wiregrass region, have long followed his story of reinvention from felon to do-gooder who hand-delivered meals, organized unity marches and — in a place where few were willing to speak out — crusaded against brutality and racism.

During the [Senate race](#) between Roy S. Moore and Doug Jones last year, Mr. Glasgow gained attention with his effort to register as voters thousands of people with felony records, a campaign

that [thrilled left-wing groups](#) while [outraging Breitbart News](#).

Nowadays, though, one thing tops the search results: a mug shot, his eyes hooded, his white goatee jutting out at a defiant angle.

#### ADVERTISEMENT

In March, Mr. Glasgow was charged with capital murder.

The day before the fatal shooting took place, he spoke at the local March for Our Lives for gun control. To an East Coast journalist who has been visiting Dothan [for a decade](#), the idea that this man could be facing death row seemed, if not Shakespearean (tragic and predestined), then perhaps Faulknerian (grotesque and confounding).

Image



The Ordinary People Society, a ministry focused on addiction, poverty and life after incarceration, was founded by Mr. Glasgow. Credit Audra Melton for The New York Times

First, there were so many people in Dothan who would [revel in his downfall](#). In a place known for [the excesses of its criminal justice system](#), Mr. Glasgow has been the critic in chief of the police, prosecutors and jailers.

And then there is the fact that he did not actually kill anyone.

The police say that a passenger in a car that Mr. Glasgow was driving got out and fatally shot another motorist. Under Alabama's complicity law, also known as the "aiding and abetting" statute, an accomplice to a crime is just as guilty as the main actor. To make their case against Mr. Glasgow, prosecutors must prove that he knew, or reasonably should have known, that violence was going to occur. He says he had no idea.

## ADVERTISEMENT

“I don’t do violence,” he said when I went down to Dothan to hear the story firsthand. “To know that I’m the cause, or involved in, a black woman’s death? It’s like the death of me, really.”

I had arrived at the office of his defense lawyer, Derek Yarbrough, to find a surprise guest: Rickey Stokes, a bail bondsman, [news blogger](#), private investigator, 911 board chairman and assistant coroner.

Mr. Stokes and Mr. Glasgow have a history that is Dothanesque. They have been adversaries — Mr. Glasgow, who is black, once protested when Mr. Stokes, who is white, chained two African-American bail-bond clients to the courthouse doors. Mr. Stokes was convicted of misdemeanor unlawful imprisonment, and complained that Mr. Glasgow had unduly made a racial issue out of it.

But it all turned out to be nothing personal: Mr. Glasgow has now requested Mr. Stokes’s investigative services on his very bizarre case.

## ADVERTISEMENT

Here’s what happened: On Sunday, March 25, Mr. Glasgow was in the Bottom, the poor neighborhood where he does much of his work, with a friend known as Little John. A young man, Jamie Townes, who Mr. Glasgow says was an acquaintance, approached and reported that his car was missing. Mr. Glasgow believed he had seen the car, a Monte Carlo, a few blocks away.

Mr. Townes, a woman named Choyce Bush, Little John and Mr. Glasgow got into the car Mr. Glasgow was driving that day, a borrowed brand-new Toyota Camry, to go look for it.

The Monte Carlo had gone on a wild ride, careening through church grounds, fields and ditches, knocking over a street sign and ramming into a tree in someone’s front yard. Finally, with its hood popped open, blocking the driver’s view, it plowed into the front of the Camry on the driver’s side.

“We didn’t find the car,” Mr. Glasgow said. “The car found us.”

After the collision, Mr. Townes got out of the back seat of the Camry and, the police say, began firing at the driver of the Monte Carlo, who everyone assumed was a man.

## ADVERTISEMENT

It turned out to be Breunia Jennings, a young woman with a long history of mental illness, who in the preceding hours had cut her hair short, fled from a motel barefoot and barely dressed, donned men’s clothing and, apparently, found Mr. Townes’s car with the motor running. The police now believe that she was driving so erratically because she was being chased.

Image



A road sign was knocked down outside the Stringer Street A.M.E. Church by the car Breunia Jennings was driving, shortly before she smashed into the car Mr. Glasgow was driving. Credit Audra Melton for The New York Times

There's more to the story. Mr. Glasgow says that not only did the Monte Carlo hit the Camry from the front, but another vehicle hit the Camry from behind. (Ms. Bush also told the police about a rear-end collision, and Mr. Townes said he was "punch drunk" from "multiple collisions," according to police testimony.) The Camry did suffer some rear damage, but no third vehicle was ever found.

Thinking there was some sort of ambush in progress, Mr. Glasgow says, he ducked, and did not see the shooting. Nor, he says, was he aware that Mr. Townes had gotten out of the car.

#### ADVERTISEMENT

Dothan is a city where judgment is swift and punishment can be harsh. It is the seat of Houston County, which ranks among the top 10 in the nation for death row convictions. It has a relatively new district attorney; the previous one was known for striking African-Americans from juries.

But at Mr. Glasgow's preliminary hearing, where he appeared in handcuffs and an orange jumpsuit, Judge Benjamin Lewis seemed dubious that criminal charges were warranted.

"What is it he did, other than pick him up and give him a ride, really?" [he asked.](#)

Judge Lewis took the rare step in a capital murder case of allowing Mr. Glasgow to post bond. A grand jury will decide whether to indict him.

While he waits, the police, some local news coverage and the Dothan rumor mill have portrayed him as callous and indifferent. Much has been made of the fact that he did not call the police to report the Monte Carlo missing, nor did he call 911 after the accident.

## ADVERTISEMENT

To the first point, Mr. Glasgow says, he and his passengers believed the car had been taken by a friend. To the second, the police arrived at the scene moments after the shooting, so he says there was no need to call them.

There has been surprisingly little controversy over what may be the most unflattering part of the episode: Mr. Glasgow spent the minutes after the accident trying to commit insurance fraud. The Camry's owner was concerned that her insurance would not cover the accident, so she hurried to the scene in order to stand in as the driver.

At the time, Mr. Glasgow says, he did not know that anyone had died.

When Mr. Glasgow learned, hours later at the police station, that the situation was far more serious than just a car wreck, he says he promptly confessed to having been the driver.

Mr. Glasgow, 53, says he did not know that Mr. Townes, 27, had a gun. Even so, prosecutors may try to argue that it was reasonable to expect that Mr. Townes, who the police say is a drug dealer, would commit violence. Mr. Townes had previous state charges for theft and drug possession, but not for violent offenses.

## ADVERTISEMENT

Mr. Townes's lawyer, James Parkman III, says his client fired in self-defense, pointing to a Facebook post in which Ms. Jennings said she was going to "stab and shoot" and "catch a murder case."

Image



Breunia Jennings

In the eyes of the police, Mr. Glasgow's association with Mr. Townes is suspicious. But helping people with unsavory pasts is Mr. Glasgow's calling. It was some two decades ago, during Mr. Glasgow's most recent of several stints in prison, that he and a friend conceived of a ministry focused on addiction, poverty and life after incarceration. They called it The Ordinary People Society.

Mr. Glasgow's operation, housed in a run-down old shopping plaza and cluttered with the unruly archives of Mama Tina, Mr. Glasgow's mother and co-missionary, can seem picayune. But Mr. Glasgow's reach becomes apparent when he walks down the street: Every pedestrian and car stops to greet him. And over the years he has scored some improbable legal and political [victories](#).

## ADVERTISEMENT

“The real story of what happens in America happens in these small towns, and in these small towns there are people whose rights have been completely upended,” said Asha Bandele, until recently a senior director at the Drug Policy Alliance, which helped finance Mr. Glasgow’s work for years.

Dothan’s population is about one-third African-American, but the city has an entrenched white power structure: It has never had a black mayor, police chief, circuit judge, county sheriff or school superintendent. It is the type of place where, if you call the police chief or the district attorney with a complaint, he may offer to pray with you right there on the line. In part through the common ground of Christianity, Mr. Glasgow has been able to forge some relationships with white businessmen who help pay for his work.

But where some see an advocate, many others — particularly white people in town — see a charlatan. The murder charge complicated matters. Though his hearing was packed with supporters, some African-American residents have turned against Mr. Glasgow as well.

Image



Mr. Glasgow visited the scene of the shooting. Credit Audra Melton for The New York Times

The city was teeming with unfounded rumors: That Mr. Townes was actually Mr. Glasgow’s son. That they were in cahoots as drug kingpins. That Mr. Glasgow and Mr. Townes had terrorized and raped Ms. Jennings, then hunted her down. I heard that one from Ms. Jennings’ mother, Lakesia Reeves, who said she heard it from an anonymous caller.

## ADVERTISEMENT

In that environment, it is perhaps not surprising that Mr. Glasgow, too, would believe he is being deliberately targeted. For his opponents, he says, restoring voting rights to felons was bad enough,

he says, but the victory of Mr. Jones, a Democrat, in the Senate race was the final straw. “They want me dead,” he insisted.

Accustomed to being an activist for others, Mr. Glasgow now finds himself without a champion of his own. But as he awaits the grand jury’s decision, he has found a new crusade: changing the accomplice law.

“I did my time for what I did,” he said, speaking of previous armed robbery and drug convictions. “I’m not going to do it for something I didn’t do.”

Follow Shaila Dewan on Twitter: [@shailadewan](https://twitter.com/shailadewan).

A version of this article appears in print on July 8, 2018, on Page A14 of the